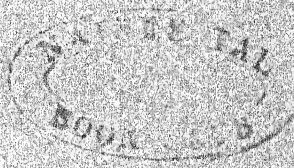


# IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

A Novel.

BY  
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# IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

## CHAPTER I.

AFTER another week of quiet and perfect happiness, side by side and heart in heart with her husband, he, coming to Irion one morning, said, bending over the back of her chair, and playing fondly with her hair :

‘I find myself obliged to leave home for a day or two, dear one. It’s a mere business matter—a money matter, if you would know ; my presence on the spot is a *sine quâ non*. I cannot take you with me, much as I should like to do so. Can my wife exist for a day or two without me?’

‘I must manage it somehow, since you cannot take me with you. I suppose one mustn’t



expect to be always by one's husband's side, and it's as well to go into training early.'

She spoke gaily, binding up her courage for the little deception. He, standing behind her, did not see that her eyes were full of tears. It was no great trial to him, this first parting. Men are realistic, and he knew that two days would see him at her side again, happier for the separation. But women are imaginative. To her it seemed a breaking off—an end of something, which had been too beautiful to last for long. She did not doubt that he would come back to her, or fancy that he would change in absence. She only felt that the sweet sleepy monotony of their love was being awaked to the realities of life and action, which means change, look at it how we will. She must bear it, of course.

Irion had never thought, after the manner of some foolish women, to clog her husband's heels, and be as a millstone around his neck for him to carry about in all times and places. She did not wish to know his every movement, and to torment herself because she must needs find him human. Men love their freedom ;

they were never created for bondage. If freedom be not granted them, they will draw their swords and fight for it ; or if weapons be denied them, they will steal it, like thieves in the night.

This Irion knew ; and being a wise woman, she preferred that her husband should praise her for her free gift of liberty, feeling himself bound in honour not to abuse her trust. 'Husbands are but overgrown school-boys,' she said. 'Treat them as MEN, and they will not deceive you—if honour be in them. If not, they will dishonour you anyhow. There is no fighting against the Devil, let his shape be what it will.' Therefore Irion would not show that she was disappointed, because her husband had been able to persuade himself to leave her so soon. She was disappointed, and very sad at heart ; but then she would have been the same after weeks or months. The first parting is always so hard to bear !

'And what money affairs may you—an Australian—have in England ?' she asked presently, more for the sake of saying something than to question him.

'All the world has money dealings with England,' he answered her. 'If I were to talk to you for half an hour about loans, and stocks, and shares, how much would you understand of my explanation? Women were not created to dabble in business affairs.'

He spoke more irritably to her than he had ever done since their marriage. In part, he fancied that she wished to question his honesty of purpose in leaving her. But in truth, he was chafing under the necessity to prevaricate with her even in this matter of property.

Daily, hourly, the curse of his own wrongdoing was falling upon him. To him it was becoming a very torture of hell that he must go on with this deception—once begun. It had not been a part of his calculation. He had always told himself that so soon as Irion's love were a proven thing, he would confess to his name and to his country, leaving her to fancy what she would of the old murder story—if indeed she had heard aught of it—a thing so long gone by. But he did not know then. In those days he had not seen her lips curl with scorn, and her cheeks pale with horror, at the

name of Ulric Aylmer. He had not heard her say with passionate intensity that this one sinner, in all the world, stood without the pale of her mercy. That this one hand alone of all God's creatures she would refuse to grasp, even for humanity's sake. But now he *had* seen and he *had* heard, and he knew it all. Now, when there was no escape ; when to go on lying to the end was the only hope left him. 'She shall never awake,' he said now, goaded to desperation, 'never so long as I can drug her to sleep again with drops sweet as the nectar of Olympus. What matter if the gods drive myself into hell for the stealing of them ?'

After a moment he was sorry for his hardness and for the manner of his answering her. And taking her upon his knee, he talked to her of the delights of their meeting again, and of all the happiness which lay stretched out before them in all the long years to come. Then, to give her pleasure, he drew a picture of himself as he should be, as she was making him. And the picture was of a man great with all the human greatness, and of a

woman triumphant over fate. But she, putting her arms about him, answered :

‘No—no, Claud, it is yourself—and yours the triumph. Yours, your nature as God made it for you. She only asserts her rights at last, and claims from you the prize you would have refused her out of sheer rebelliousness.’

‘I wonder you put any faith in such a rebel.’

‘Women have a predisposition to like black sheep.’

And so, jokingly, but full of love, they talked on till the time for his going. The call had been a telegram for his immediate presence, and he was hurried from her with an hour’s notice. Surely electricity will by-and-by fret the very lives out of us, if it goes on driving us so mercilessly, never allowing us time to breathe, and grow quiet again.

Ulric Aylmer was not tired, not yet. And as he stood on the threshold of his home, having bidden Irion good-bye, he told himself, looking back at her bed-room window: ‘In this at least there shall be no deception. What

she thinks me *I will be*. Great—as the world estimates greatness, as she estimates it. Successful. So shall the honour of it fall upon her as atonement for the rest.’

Atonement! Is there any atonement for wrongs deliberately and designedly done? Will late-found honesty atone for early dishonour? Can success atone for the deceit which has been put forth as an arm to grasp it? Does the end justify the means?

Who shall answer?

Irion had work to do after her husband left—and work is a certain cure for sentimental melancholy. Household duties may be commonplace, but they are very sufficing. The new servant was coming to-morrow, and rooms must be arranged for her accommodation and comfort. Irion's country ignorance led her so far astray as to believe that her servant's welfare should, as a matter of course, be one with her own. She was ‘old-fashioned’ enough to say still that love is a better task-master than scorn, and sympathy a better compeller than gold. Of course, in these days no one believes that servants feel

anything—except the money they handle. Pay them what they ask, and they will serve us, we say. It is no trouble to fling gold in their faces as payment for their bondage, but it might cost us a night's rest occasionally to *think* for their well-being. We choose to sleep—and pay for our rest. It is well. Only let us not complain when our servants give us back nothing beyond the coin they have received from us, hard and cold and thankless, as we measured it out to them.

But Irion was a country girl, and people excused her for her 'eccentricities.'

Elizabeth was to have a comfortable room in which to sit and work for her mistress; a front room, 'to be cheerful,' with air, and light, and Venetians to keep out the sun. 'It's bad enough to have to sew all day in the heat,' Irion said, 'but worse to stifle over it.'

And so in all things pertaining to the maid, who had promised to serve her faithfully.

And there was some one beyond Elizabeth for whose pleasure Irion had to put aside her



melancholy that day. Gilbert Hurst had volunteered to lunch there before they knew of Lewis's going away. It need make no difference. 'Irion could amuse him well enough,' her husband said, and she agreed. So there were Gilbert's likes and dislikes to consider in ordering for the day. Irion had large ideas of hospitality. It was a delight to her to welcome a friend, not in word only, but in deed. She did not think it unbecoming to show that she had considered beforehand of his coming by providing for him what would make that coming most pleasant to himself.

Let us deny it as we may, food is of much account in the sum of this world's well-being ; and a guest is honoured or despised by the meats we set before him.

Whitebait was a weakness of Gilbert Hurst, and whitebait must be procured ; and Irion drove half over London to get it. What time remained to her for melancholy musings ?

Afterwards Gilbert himself 'put in an appearance ;' and it was morally impossible

to be sad in his company. Even rational quiet was denied her then, and for a moment's silence she was bidden to 'wake up,' as if the sum total of life were *talk*. Perhaps it is, and Gilbert Hurst was after all only a personified simile.

After lunch he pressed her to let him take her to a *fête* at the Botanical Gardens. She had no desire to go there, but it would please him. So out of her good nature he was able to persuade her. And she went.

She had not thought of the propriety or the impropriety of such an introduction into public. It never struck her that her very beauty would make question of who and what she might be, side by side with Gilbert Hurst, so well known in London now, amongst a certain 'undesirable' set. She did not know (how should she?) that this same set of 'awfully good fellows,' he called them, would claim his acquaintance there, before the eyes of all the world—and hers with him; probably renewing it at some future time, when their room would certainly profit her more than their company. She did not think of

anything but that Gilbert was looking very persuasive, and herself feeling very dull, and that she had nothing better to do this afternoon. It would at least help to pass away some of the dreary hours of Claud's absence from home.

So she went with Gilbert Hurst to the 'Botanical' *fête*. Went in a hansom too—he having 'worked her up to the mark.' And she enjoyed the novelty of it all, with the same keenness of enjoyment which had so often frightened her parents for her future when she was amongst them at Rockford.

'She's plenty of go in her,' Gilbert Hurst told himself, delighted.

## CHAPTER II.

ARRIVED at the gardens, they did as everyone else does ; walked about and sat about, and listened to music—felt hot in the head, and cold in the feet, and tried to persuade themselves it was ‘very pleasant,’ as if they need only say so often enough to prove its truth. The sun scorched in the broad walk, the wind froze in the shady nooks ; and Irion did not feel pleasure enough in her new dress to support cheerfully all other evils for its dear sake. After all, it was a mistake coming, only the walk home in the evening cool would be as ‘jolly’ as the drive there in the hansom.

Gilbert was very charming. He could be very charming to women, a charm all his own, too, and by no means common. But Irion, being still in love with her husband, only saw

in Gilbert a lively and pleasant companion in Claud's absence.

Neither was Gilbert in love, or 'spoony,' or 'fascinated,' or in any 'doubtful' state of feeling towards Irion, although Mrs. Betrix had told Naomi so confidently that it was so. We are always most confident where we know least. Ignorance and confidence run hand in hand. No; Gilbert thought her 'jolly,' if that were a sin, and, 'by long odds, the best looking woman out this season,' which is, perhaps, more dangerous ground, but not hopeless; and 'the nicest woman it was ever a fellow's luck to pick up for a wife,' which of course is a sentiment no other 'fellow' is supposed to express, except the husband in question, who, by-the-bye, is the only person who never does express such desirable satisfaction. But Gilbert Hurst said it over and over again, and did not care 'a hang' for Mrs. Betrix's stiffened back and 'elevated classical feature,' as he expressed it.

He was perfectly happy to-day, if Irion was not. He was proud, too, with a young man's natural pride, in being seen with the best-

looking, best-dressed woman of the gathering. It has been said that Irion, even as a girl with no money at her command, had a special faculty for dressing, and a special individuality when dressed. Now, the means being hers, she was always faultless in taste and detail. Morning, noon, or night, her clothes were the very ideal of artistic grace and originality.

After they had walked about, and sat about, shaken hands with a few people who knew her, and a few who knew him, and many mutual acquaintances, friends of the Hurst family; after they were tired of everything, and just turning down the broad walk to go home, Gilbert exclaimed, 'By Jove!' so suddenly, that Irion started out of a reverie, into which she had fallen through weariness.

'What?' she asked, staring vacantly round.

'Agatha and Naomi, by all that's beastly! and they swore they weren't coming. What gratuitous lies women do tell!'

'I think you might give them credit for having changed their minds, or they may answer you, "What sweeping accusations

men *do* make!"' Irion lectured; but then Irion had a way of lecturing which was not at all like 'lecturing.' Men took it as a special compliment to themselves—it and the smile which accompanied it.

'Changed their minds! is that it?' he answered. 'Well, I'd rather tell a good lie now and again, than be perpetually *changing my mind*. The one does show an intention to go through with something. The other is a sneaky way of getting off the trouble of thinking before one speaks—or thinking at all, for the matter of that.'

'I wonder what the world would be like if no one ever changed his mind!'

'His!—oh! I don't include men—not a bit of it. We like our liberty. But then we don't abuse it, as women do.'

She was about to answer him; but at this point, they found themselves face to face with Mrs. Betrix and Naomi. Mrs. Betrix greeted them as she had greeted a hundred others in that day's walk, with a bow and a smile, which were intended to avoid further acquaintance. But Naomi stopped and spoke, so Mrs.



Betrix was compelled to stop also. She could not have passed on without absolute rudeness. And Mrs. Betrix was never rude.

But although Naomi stopped to speak to her old friend, she was too well drilled to show any pleased surprise at the unexpected meeting. Society does not allow one to be surprised or pleased. She gave the tips of her fingers to Irion and the conventional smile, and Mrs. Betrix remarked that it was a hot day. But she took care to let her manner show a distinct disapproval of Irion's presence there with Gilbert.

'Whether the husband were following or not, it was a matter for objection that Mrs. Lewis—in that very conspicuous dress—should be *seen* under Gilbert's doubtful chaperonage,' as she remarked to Naomi afterwards.

But Irion, having once decided that Mrs. Betrix was hateful to her, ignored her utterly, and would not see any slight conveyed in manner only. This unconsciousness provoked Mrs. Betrix to further efforts.

'And your husband—shall we have the

pleasure of seeing him ?' she asked, looking to the right and left as if in search of him.

'He is out of town,' Irion answered, too honestly to be very gratifying.

'Indeed ! Gilbert must be proud at being trusted to take care of you in his stead. He rarely gets a position of trust given *him*.'

'Right you are, Agatha,' he answered, accepting the compliment minus the satire. 'But there's something to be said on the other side. I'm proud to escort her, of course ; but then every woman hasn't the luck to find an escort when she wants one.'

That was pointed, and Mrs. Betrix flinched. She was not as thick-skinned as Irion, after all. Naomi thought that things were looking unpleasant, so she said to her sister :

'If you want to hear "Lohengrin," you had better go to the stand at once—the selection comes next. We shall see Irion again, no doubt, before we go.' Then, to Irion, 'Which way are you going ?'

'Home now,' she answered. 'Come and see me to-morrow, if you can manage it. I shall be at home all the afternoon.'

‘Thanks ; I will see what I can do.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Mrs. Betrix, stiffly, addressing herself to Irion, but pointing her words at Gilbert—‘perhaps, when my brother has seen you safely to your carriage, he will not mind coming to us at the band-stand, and doing the same for us?’

‘We don’t deal in carriages,’ Gilbert answered her, laughing ; ‘we do the vulgar cab, or the still more vulgar heel and toe. Having inveigled Mrs. Lewis out, I am called upon to see her safely home again. Duty and pleasure combined—you perceive? Result—my beloved sisters go to the wall, after the manner of sisters. Don’t think you’ll come to grief, Agatha?’ he added wickedly.

Mrs. Betrix did not condescend to answer ; she wished Irion a haughty good-bye—Naomi was simply passive. And so they parted. When they were out of hearing, Mrs. Betrix remarked to Naomi :

‘I shall ask Ormond to use his authority with you, Naomi, to discourage your further acquaintance with that Mrs. Lewis. There can be no necessity to keep it up. She is

going out to Australia, and will have no future connection with us or our set.'

And Naomi answered never a word. There was something rather dogged in her silence, Mrs. Betrix thought. But she could correct all that. Ormond must be called upon to interfere; Ormond, whose authority in the family was unquestioned. He must be made to see this thing in its proper light, and to show it to Naomi as he thought best. At all costs, Mrs. Lewis must be forbidden to her as a friend, and to the family as an acquaintance.

'Her dress was perfectly hideous,' Mrs. Betrix said later, 'and I am certain she paints.'

Nevertheless, Gilbert took Irion home. And she was very happy in his company, forgetting for the moment even her husband's absence. A walk in the evening cool, a laugh with a boon companion, a feeling that one is at least as good as one's neighbour and certainly prettier, who could be sad? Not Irion. Plenty of work to-day, plenty of play to-morrow. A husband coming home by-and-by

in the gloaming, who could doubt or fear—who at twenty-five? Not Irion.

Besides, from a matter-of-fact and unromantic point of view, there was the new maid coming this evening; she must be taught Irion's ways, and set in working order. She was a novelty, and novelty has its charms.

'I hope I shall not look unnatural the first time I ring for my maid,' Irion said, laughing at her own rusticity.

It is well to be foolish while one can. Wisdom is bought with many tears.

## CHAPTER III.

BUT there was very little to teach this Elizabeth Smith, whose name had been such a tongue-sore to Naomi. She seemed to learn by intuition, and to do everything right from the first. So learned was she in the art of dress generally, that very soon Irion found herself the pupil and Elizabeth her teacher. But this was natural, since Irion knew that her ignorance of the fitness of things was supreme. Rockford had not taught her that every hour in London has its appointed material, and that to wear silk at ten o'clock a.m. were to destroy the harmony of life.

She had yet to learn to be a woman of fashion.

But already she was opening the book and beginning her A B C, or rather, other people

had opened it for her, and set it before her eyes. They had taught her the power of her own beauty by turning to look at her as she drove and walked amongst them in the Park—that was the alphabet, and easily learnt. Luckily for her too quick progress, London was out of season, and the few people who came to look for her carriage, only wondered why any beautiful woman should care for the drive now, concluding therefrom that she was a 'nobody,' or only 'some country squire's wife,' and there was no talk of fighting for her acquaintance. Nevertheless, Irion was a marked object: speculated about, prophesied about, followed.

And all that is easy reading for a woman!

Elizabeth, too, thought her young mistress very beautiful and very love-compelling. How different her warm, winning manners, to the haughty coldness and lazy imperiousness of Miss Naomi Hurst! But how about the husband? Elizabeth had often heard Mrs. Betrix sneering at him, and prophesying misery for her. It did not seem very unlikely. A man leaving his six weeks old wife! A wife cheer-



ful in her husband's absence—seeking her own amusement, with Mr. Hurst for a companion ! Elizabeth flattered herself on being a keen observer, and she said that Mrs. Betrix was evidently ‘no fool,’ and respected her accordingly.

Our blindness may benefit our inferiors, but they have a greater respect for our cunning.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth determined to attach herself to her young mistress : to fight with her, and for her, against this vagabond husband ; to know all her weaknesses, but to conceal them ; to become a necessity to her ; and so wisely to provide for her own future.

And this was how Elizabeth read her mistress's character, looking at her through tinted glasses, which Agatha Betrix had all unknowingly put over her eyes.

But Irion was ignorant of being a ‘subject’ for domestic anatomy, and happy in her blindness. Claud was coming home to-morrow ; and all she had to do was to live till that to-morrow came. Get rid of the hours, anyhow, so that they should speed them and leave her unhurt by their passage,

leave her, as he had left her, sound of limb and whole of heart : fair to look upon—his wife.

It was all his doing that she had grown proud of late, she said, proud of her beauty and of her power ; things which in the old days had been of no account with her, because unvalued. But now, had they not purchased his love, and become priceless to their possessor as a means of keeping what they had bought ?

At last the day passed—seeming as long as two—and ‘to-morrow’ dawned, and he was coming—‘coming home to dinner,’ the letter said. So Irion prepared a feast to set before him ; the meats which he best loved to eat, and the wines which were his fancy. Not that Claud Lewis was a lover of delicacies—he despised them rather—but Irion knew that every man feels welcomed, all unconsciously to himself, by the smiling face of his dinner-table, clothed according to his taste. Claud liked fruits and nature’s dainties, and Irion gave him of the best she could buy, with fresh flowers to cover them, so that they should savour less of Regent Street and *£ s. d.*

Gilbert Hurst called in the morning 'to see whether Lewis had turned up,' he said, and Irion asked him to go shopping with her.

'I want a walk,' she said, 'for the benefit of my complexion. Claud hates pale cheeks, and the weather is so hot there is no avoiding them without a good walk in the morning cool.'

'You need not excuse your request,' he answered her, laughing; 'you take all the gilt off the gingerbread.'

So they went out together and came in together, and he lunched with her, going away late in the afternoon. He made no secret to his family of where he had been all day; for of course they questioned him after the manner of foolish women! A deceitful or an ill-tempered man would have answered them with a lie. Gilbert was good-tempered and straightforward, and he gratified their curiosity.

But he was no diplomatist.

At six o'clock Claud Lewis came home as he had said, and Irion felt that there was nothing left to be wished for in all the world.

He was cheerful with the delight of seeing her again, and tender with his deepest tenderness. And the meeting was worth the parting.

They sat down to dinner. She told him everything of her doings, but did not question him as to his. He would tell her unasked, she knew, if he wished to do so; if not, asking would not make him. He heard of her going to the Botanical Gardens with Gilbert Hurst, and a look, half of anger, half of pain, came upon his face. Irion, marking it, told herself that should he go away again, she would not repeat the (evident) offence. But he said nothing. He knew himself foolish to be jealous of other men liking her company, or she theirs. Jealousy was the devil of old who had cursed his life for him. 'It shall not rise up again to curse hers also,' he said, and he was silent about Gilbert Hurst. Only, his lips and his eyes had told the tale, and Irion had understood it, and there was little fear that she would amuse herself now or ever in seeing the wordless story repeated for the gratification of her own vanity, or for triumph in her power to cause him pain.

There was nothing small in Irion.

In return he told her what he could of his doings. But again in the telling, the bitterness of death seemed to fall upon him, because he could not give her honesty for honesty. She had kept nothing from him, he knew, and he—for the reason that she believed him an Australian—could not even tell her it was only about the sale of land in England—at Aylmer—that he had been called upon to see his lawyer, and with him visit the spot.

And so, in every moment of his happiness, Ulric Aylmer was cursed by the necessity to carry out a part which, in a fit of love-goaded madness, he had taken upon himself to play. A pitiful part which he must carry out to the end, lest he should see his wife recoil from him, lest her cheek should grow pale at the mention of his name, and she should shudder at his touch—believing it would leave blood-stains on her pure skin! He loved her; God knows there was no falseness here. But for the very truth of that love, his deception was falling like a curse upon him now when it was too late. Too late!—O God! for how many

of us have those words been a death-knell!

But he was able to act—that was one consolation—and she was content with his acting.

‘At best,’ he said, trying to jeer down truth, “*All the world's a stage*”—some of us are good actors, some bad. The good are successful, that's all.’

But somehow the old bitterness which had carried him through to this time would not come back at his call, now when he wanted it so desperately. He was growing soft under Irion's love-touch, melting to the level of humanity, and all the hardening work of the last twenty years was being undone.

Well! when the last chain should give way the end would come; ‘only they are *strong—strong*,’ he said, clenching his hands till the nails pierced into them.

#### CHAPTER IV.

THEY were sitting by the open window after dinner, looking out into the gardens.

It was a sultry August evening—one of those evenings when, in cities, one gazes despairingly at dust-browned grass and smoke-blackened trees, and tries to imagine there is coolness in the sight of them. 'Everyone' had gone out of London. The house in Park Place was shut up. But Gilbert remained. He had taken up his quarters at the Langham, and was still *about town*.

Irion had suggested that they also should go into the country, or to the sea, for the short remainder of their days in England; but Claud had firmly refused her.

'In a crowd we have no individuality,' he



told himself. 'In the country, people would question of families, and rights, and even of the name I give them. "Lewis," they would say; "what Lewis? The Lewises of Sevenoaks?" And, consulting their "County Families," we should either be given a false place or refused any place at all. But we should not be left unhandled. In London we are only a little finger to a large body—no one knows we are there if we don't ache or pain to tell of our partnership in life.'

And so they were in London.

His cheerful mood had passed from him now, and he sat side by side with Irion, holding her hand, but staring away into vacancy. Irion only thought him tired with his journeying, and was silent too, indulging his mood. Presently she remembered something. It was important. It would rouse him.

'Oh, by the way, Claud, there was a letter from the manager, or the lessee, or whatever you call him—Desmond, you know. It came by the late post last night. He wants you to make a slight alteration in the second act, and to see you about it to-morrow.'

'What alteration?' he asked, rousing with an effort.

'I didn't quite understand the letter. You shall see it.' She went over and pulled the bell. 'It is in my desk,' she continued, sitting down again, 'and I am too lazy to mount the stairs to fetch it. See now the evil results of giving me a maid, husband mine! I ring for Elizabeth to bring down that weighty matter, my desk.'

'Who's Elizabeth?'

'The lady's-maid!' with mock pride.

'Of course—I had forgotten. Do you like her?'

'Very much—as maids go.'

'Good-looking?'

'You'd better decide that important question for yourself, by taking a look at her when she——'

The door opened, and Elizabeth stood waiting for her orders.

His back was turned to her, so his question did not answer itself.

'Bring down my russia-leather desk, please, Elizabeth,' Irion said.

'Yes, ma'am.' And she was gone again.

'Well?' Irion questioned of her husband.

'One can't turn round and stare a person in the face, child. I didn't catch a sight of her.'

'I call her good-looking. When she was young she must have been very pretty indeed, I should say; but men's tastes and women's never agree.'

'You've chosen an ancient party, then?'

'No—middle-aged; that's to say, thirty possibly, or more; but decidedly good-looking.'

There was a silence of a minute or two; then he began talking to Irion of the alteration he should possibly be asked to make in his play.

Elizabeth had left the door open, and she came down with the desk, entering the room unnoticed by them; for they were both standing up now, and looking out of the window. He was bending over her, and talking in a low earnest voice. He was trying to persuade her of something, evidently.

Elizabeth came into the room, and was bringing the desk up to her mistress. Half-

way across the room she stopped, and stood still, staring like an idiot at the backs of the two talkers by the window. Staring and straining her eyes towards them, and listening—listening eagerly to every word he spoke.

Presently she gave a gasp, as though she had seen a ghost, and it had passed from her sight, and she had forced herself to believe that it was only fancy after all.

She went up close to them, trembling and colourless.

‘Your desk, ma’am.’

She was at Irion’s side, and facing him. He looked up as she spoke, fixing his eyes upon her. Irion did not see the look in his face, but she heard a woman’s shriek close at her side, and the words :

‘Ulric! Ulric Aylmer! you—you here!’ which rang through the room. Then a heavy fall—and the body of Elizabeth senseless at her feet.

Irion scarcely moved. She only looked up into her husband’s eyes, and down at the fainted woman. She only felt as if a lightning-

flash had suddenly burst out from the sky, revealing to her a hell in the place where she had pictured heaven.

And in the light of the flash she saw everything clearly.

His strange and varying moods. The crime which sat so heavily upon him sometimes, which she in her blindness had called a folly, pityingly. The old love which he had confessed to her. The new deceit which he had practised upon her. It was so huge a crime that it stunned her, falling upon her, so that she stood there silent for the space of a minute, and then—she only turned round and walked out of the room. Up to her bedroom she went, and her step never faltered. Alone inside it, she only sat down upon the edge of the bed, tearless, almost emotionless, for a great agony takes time in the developing. She was a little paler, and a little colder than her wont. And the minutes lagged to mock at her numbness. That was all she knew, as she stared vacantly at the hands of the clock opposite.

And Ulric Aylmer was alone with the

woman he had once loved so madly. Alone, and looking down upon her and wondering what there had been in her to make a slave, a fool—a criminal of him. She was not much changed. Less round of limb, less red of cheek and lip, but herself—Bessie—Bessie Smith of Aylmer village. The girl he had once chosen for a wife! The girl he had loved with a boy's first passionate truthfulness! And for that love's sake he had lost the world, casting it from him without a thought when a cry from her had made of him—a murderer!

He did not touch her, and very soon consciousness came back to her. She sat up for a moment bewildered, then rose from the ground and stood before him, leaning on the high back of a chair.

'Are you better now?' he asked her, for he could not forget what had been, and on all points he held her blameless.

'Yes—oh yes—I—I—I was frightened,' she said, excusing herself. 'I am so sorry. Have I let it out—or did she know? I hope she knew, poor thing. Why are us women

such fools?' she added, stamping her foot with more meaning, if less grace, than cultivation may give to the expression.

The error of speech and the awkwardness of action jarred upon him—coming from her. He had not remembered these things in her, but only her virtues. There had been poetry and tenderness in the remembrance. But they were all gone now. Nevertheless, he owed her something—forbearance, at least, and gentleness. She was grieved at what she had done; honestly, if unsightly grieved, and tears were rolling over her cheeks. She brushed them away with her hand, ashamed.

'My wife did not know,' Claud Lewis answered, 'but she loves me. She will forgive me.'

'And what had I better do now?' Elizabeth sobbed.

'Nothing—you——,' he was going to say, 'you have done enough,' but he stopped himself and said: 'You cannot help us.'

'But I must set it right—all I can—mustn't I? Won't you let me tell her all about it?'

‘She knows.’

‘What! she has heard the story too, has she? Well, I never! how things do get about! But, anxiously, you will let me tell her *why* you did it—that it wasn’t altogether wickedness, you know.’

‘You have changed your opinion, Bessie. Once you judged with the others; once *you* had no mercy, no pity; once when I craved it at your hands. To-day I do not ask one or the other of you. Leave my wife to me.’

He spoke haughtily now, remembering how Bessie had scorned him because, for her sake, he had branded himself with the brand of blood. She was his promised wife then, and even then she had not understood him. How should she now?

‘I was so young,’ she said, frightened at his tone, ‘and women can bear anything else but blood and death—young women, I mean—we get tougher as we get older. I loved you always—but marrying was different. I couldn’t do it—no—not if it was now instead of then.’

She shuddered, even as Irion had shud-



dered, at the remembrance, and turned her head away from him, as if to look at him were in that moment a disgust to her. But she, being older, and as she said, 'tougher,' conquered her repugnance, and turned to him, holding out her hand :

'I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, or to interfere between you and your wife. If you don't wish me to say anything, why I won't say anything, that's all. Of course she will like it better if *you* tell her—and you could say to her what you couldn't say to other people. Tell her the whole lot of it now—be sure you do—from beginning to end—don't mind me.'

'I shall tell her what is necessary—yes.'

'And I suppose I'd better pack up and be off now, at once ; she'd rather not see me, I expect,' very sadly. 'What do you think about it ?'

Perhaps she hoped he would contradict her, but he only answered :

'Yes, you had better go. If Mrs.—Mrs. Lewis wants you I will send for you. Leave an address.'

'I do wish you would let me tell her, though it might do some good, coming from headquarters.'

'There is nothing to tell,' he answered angrily. 'The deed was done—who takes account of causes?'

'Your wife will, of course.'

'*Did you?*'

She was silent, not knowing how to answer him. It was true that although for her he had struck the blow, saving her from a deadly insult, she had turned upon him, finding the result was death, and called him murderer with the rest, refusing to be his wife, for all that her troth had been plighted to him, and her love given to him. Yes, he had accused her truly. She had turned away from him, finding him blood-stained. 'But then,' she argued, 'I was not his wife.' Yes, had the deed been done after marriage which was done before, doubtless ignorant Bessie had pardoned it out of her wifely faithfulness. Surely Irion would not be slower to mercy. She was a woman, and women, with all their weakness, are strong to stand up by the side of a falling man.

But still Elizabeth could not answer him, and she stood dumb before his question, 'Did you?' biting her little finger-nail nervously. Afterwards she flew to self-accusation as a relief, muttering, loud enough for him to hear her :

'What a fool I was to have cried out like that! Why couldn't I have kept quiet! Fool that I am! fool! fool!'

And he answered nothing, but sat down again on his chair, and stared out over the street. As he did not heed her mutterings, she addressed him :

'Ulric—Mr. Aylmer—you—you don't think I *intended* to give you all this pain—nor her—do you?'

'Fate did—not you, Bessie,' kindly.

'And I'm going now—going to leave you and her to fight it out together as you wish. But, I think, you hadn't—well—anyhow—and—and'—she was growing nervous now—'and will you mind if I ask to shake hands with you—just to say good-bye, you know—in—in remembrance of old times, and—and to show you ain't angry.'

He held his hand towards her, but did not

speaking. Men are slow to find words when their hearts are full. He was thinking of Irion even then; but trying to force an interest in the woman before him, because he owed it to her to be at least kind.

She took his hand, pressed it to her lips, and bursting into loud sobbing, ran noisily out of the room. She knew men hated crying women. Poor Elizabeth! Of a truth she was no heroine to stand so forward in this tragedy. But often our parts do not suit us.

And this was the meeting between them after twenty years of separation. There was not much romance or excitement about it, and yet the occasion was made for both. Is it not always so with us? The most sentimental situations theoretically, are the most commonplace actually. The most thrilling drama on the stage would be acted in life with scarcely a movement to place it apart from the rest of our existence. We have but to eat and drink amid our tears—and sentiment is gone. It is only on the stage that scenic effects are produced. Reality lacks colour always.

## CHAPTER V.

AT midnight Irion was still sitting on her bed in a dumb stupor.

But as the clock struck twelve a new life awoke in her a sudden rush of human warmth, a sudden coming back of feeling. Wifely love triumphant still.

‘But he is not guilty,’ she said, starting up and pacing the room. ‘The law proved him so—not a murderer! not blood-stained!—*and nothing else matters—nothing.* The people of Aylmer were wrong, after all, and justice was not blind. He is the sinned against, we the sinners; we who drove him from his home by our incredulity. It was not he who killed James Hobb—the law said so. He is not guilty—my husband! I will go to him, and comfort him for the pain I

have given. He thinks me another of his accusers—poor over-sensitive Claud !’

And she smiled at what a moment ago had been an agony unbearable, smoothing her hair, and bathing her face the while, ‘to bring the colour back.’

Then she went downstairs to him quickly. He was sitting in the same spot, almost in the same attitude as Elizabeth had left him, only his head was bowed down upon his hands.

Irion stood in the doorway and spoke to him.

‘Ulric,’ she said, using the name he had once asked her to call him—and she had refused so heartlessly, not knowing. ‘Ulric.’

He started and looked round at her, and saw her—smiling !

‘My darling ! my darling ! my wife !’ he cried, holding out his hands to her. And she went to him, throwing her arms about him, and resting her head on his shoulder. And she was happy in the midnight stillness ; happy without leaven of doubt or fear—for had he not taken her to his heart ?

After a long while she roused, and sitting

upright on his knee, broke the silence which had fallen upon them.

‘You thought I was angry, Ulric?’

‘Yes.’

‘I was startled—and I did not think. I might have asked you *then* to tell me all about it; thereby sparing myself and you this pain. How often we waste our tears, Ulric,’ playfully.

‘Women do—men have none to waste.’

‘But now,’ unheeding, ‘I have come to ask you about it, that I may know the truth from yourself.’

She felt the arm which was around her loosen its grasp slightly. She looked into his eyes, and saw all the tenderness gone out of them. And the old hated look of hardness had settled on his lips. Again she doubted. But she would not misunderstand. It should not be with them as it was in novels, that for lack of an explanation things should go wrong between them. Let him satisfy her now, and there was an end of doubting for ever.

‘You will not deceive me,’ she said, putting

her arms about him; 'I know you too well. I shall believe your every word, Ulric, though I am an Aylmerite. Only I must *know*. You are not a—a—a—— You did not kill James Hobb, Ulric?'

No answer.

'Did you?' with agony-filled voice and eyes.

'I thought no one questioned it,' he replied bitterly.

'But the law—the law found you not guilty. *Was the law right?*' with desperate eagerness.

But there was no answer. And his face betrayed him.

'Do tell me, Claud—dear Claud!' speaking softly still, but acting it all now; for again the blood-gouted dagger was hovering between him and her. 'Tell me that you are not—not—not a murderer. I will ask nothing more—only this. But you *must* speak,' she added, less tenderly.

'I do not know what *you* would call me,' he said. 'It is so easy to play upon words, you see.'

'It was not you who murdered James



Hobb in the hazel coppice at Aylmer—was it ?

‘I killed him ; yes.’

She half started away from him, but forced herself back again to her place on his knee. It was a matter of forcing now, and she could not put her arms about him. There was one hope left.

‘But not intentionally—you did not *mean* to kill him—it was accident ? Oh, for God’s sake speak, Claud ! *Was it accident ?*’

‘I was in a passion, if that be accident.’

She started from his knee, throwing off the hand which would have held her back, and standing before him, but not near him. She went on questioning, frightened and horror-pursued now, but determined to know all, that nothing should mislead her.

‘And were the people of Aylmer right then, after all—were you jealous of the man ? Did you hate him ? Did you—you kill him, because he stood between you and that girl ?’

‘I did hate him, and I was jealous of him, and he did get his death-blow because of my love for the girl. But,’ seeing her shrink

further and further from him, and turn her face away, covering it with her hands, 'but it was not quite as you think, Irion. Don't look like that, dear one. Come back to me, and let me tell you the story—and judge me afterwards.'

He held out both his hands towards her, but she turned from him still.

Nothing but loathing moved her now.

'I can hear it here,' she said. And she shuddered, as in those days of her childhood she had shuddered when he laid his hand upon her head, and her companions told her it had left blood-stains there.

And because he had confessed his crime, all the deceit which had followed rose up to anger her against him. (She would never have thought of this, had the other been disproven.)

'Anything, anything but human blood,' she said—and would not go to him.

The agony of that moment would have driven a weaker man to accept his fate, and to leave her now, lest she should torture him with further questioning. Ulric Aylmer was

strong, and his love was perfect. He only said :

‘Has all your tenderness gone from you, Irion? All your dear wifely tenderness, that you can stand so far off, and bid me tell you the story of my crime, as if I were play-acting from a stage? Come to me, let me have your hand in mine, and I can bear the rest.’

‘I would rather stay here,’ she answered, coldly. Had he not just spoken of crime?

‘Because I have pained you. But, Irion, if you who are innocent suffer, what must I, who am guilty? *You* cannot even conceive the agony of it—thank God! But you can make it less by your pity, dear one.’

‘Pity!’ she muttered, and a look of scorn came upon her face.

‘Yes—pity! Is a man craven who calls for pity from a wife he has wronged?’

‘My wrongs are not the question. You were going to tell me about the m——, about yourself.’

‘You have made it very hard to tell, Irion. It is a long story, and after all, will profit me nothing.’

'Will it disprove your guilt?' anxiously.

'No.'

'Then I would rather not hear it; I do not want a detail of your love for another,' she said bitterly, for every word he spoke only made her loathe him more. He was Ulric Aylmer now, and utterly apart from the man she had kissed so tenderly—yesterday. 'No depths of love can condone bloodshed,' she added, 'and you tell me distinctly that you did the deed—or have I made a mistake?' eagerly.

'Would to God you had! No, Irion, there is no mistake. A moment of ungoverned passion, and I cursed my own life.'

'*A moment of passion!* yes, that is how we all excuse ourselves. If you have no better one to offer me I will leave you. I take no delight in hearing a simple detail of horrors, since that detail, as you say, will profit you nothing.'

She was growing colder and harder as the minutes passed, and she turned to go out of the room. It was in a moment of passion that he had married her, and made her share

his murderer's curse. She remembered it all now, taking strict account of it. And his very presence was becoming hateful to her.

'You do not wish to hear the story, then?' he asked, seeing her moving away.

'Elizabeth's story? the story of your old love? *no*. It is enough that I know the end of it. And I am tired, very tired;' she was standing in the door-way now.

'But, Irion—dear wife! you will not leave me like this?' and going up to her, he took her hand, holding her back as she would have left the room.

'I shall see you again to-morrow,' she answered, calmly but coldly. 'If there is anything more to be said, say it then.'

She was absolutely heedless now of the agony she inflicted, absolutely heartless, absolutely unforgiving. Ulric Aylmer, of Aylmer, stood before her, and she felt as she had always believed she should feel towards him.

It mattered nothing that he groaned in bitterness of spirit, pressing her hand which he was holding to his lips, and to his eyes.

She did not heed the tears which wetted it, or the burning of the lips which kissed it. She was not softened by the ring of smothered agony in his voice, as he said to her :

‘Be merciful, darling—be *merciful* !’

She only forced her hand out of his grasp, and leaving him standing there, went up again to her bed-room. She turned the key in the lock, and was lost to him.

Yes—lost. He saw it in the change which had come over her. The old prejudice had proved stronger than the new love.

‘But then it has all come upon her so suddenly,’ he argued, persuading himself if it were possible, as he sat alone in the early morning light. ‘To-morrow she will not shrink from me, and shudder at my touch. She will grow used to the idea, and—I can bear with her ; handling her gently till she shall return to me. If I could give her back her maidenhood and her freedom, she might claim them now, and I should have one sin the less to drag me hellwards. Repentance ! heavens ! why do men repent ? There is more of agony and less of satisfaction in one



hour of repentance than in a whole lifetime of sin. We repent. But we cannot undo—and our impotence derides our faith.'

Thus he argued, kicking against the pricks of his own inability to undo the work of his own hand. Not the old crime of blood—that was far off to-day—but the new sin against a woman. Love had made a craven of him, and now he could not face the destiny which, in the days of his old heart-hardness, he had chosen to call upon himself. He had believed himself strong enough to wear the poison-steeped garment, and to resist its deadly influence, because of the magnificence with which he should stand before the woman who had bribed him with her love. But his strength was gone from him, now when he most wanted it in all his life, and he could only crave for mercy or death, as the be all and the end all of this farce of living.

And Irion upstairs, in her arm-chair, wide awake in the grey dawn, was buckling over herself a coat of mail, cold and hard and impenetrable. It made her shiver, and her lips turn white; but to wear it was her only safe-

guard. She was Ulric Aylmer's wife—the wife of a murderer, and of a woman-betrayer. The wife of a man who had not hesitated to make of her what she was—a husband-hater. She was hideous to herself, looking inwards, now that all her love had turned to loathing, and all her heart's beauty to deformity. Yet she must stand before the mirror, and look at herself for all days to come. There was no escape from him. What could she do? where go? Would not every corner of the earth question of why she had left her husband? and could she answer: 'To escape the touch of a murderer's hand?' No; she might loathe, but she could not betray him.

She must do as she had agreed to do—go out with him to Melbourne, and with him lose her own identity. And setting obedience in the place of love, she must exist, not live—life, young beautiful life, was over for her—exist, in the hope that time would bring to her—*indifference*.

And this was all that lay before her—*indifference!*



## CHAPTER VI.

AND as Irion had willed it, so the days and the nights passed away.

They met at the breakfast and at the dinner-table, she and her husband ; and they sat together in the drawing-room when Gilbert Hurst or Naomi were there to keep them company. But alone they were apart. None saw what stood between them. Even Gilbert, often as he came there, could not see the great brick wall which had built itself up, so that their lives were separate for ever.

Irion was a better actor than Ulric Aylmer—women always are—and Gilbert (not being another woman) failed to notice the rouge and the tinsel. ‘Lewis was beastly morose and beastly cynical !’ Gilbert said ; but he called it

'one of his moods,' and tried to joke him out of it as of old.

And these jokes were as whip-thongs over bare wounds. But there was no escaping the torture. It was all part of his life just now—the wages of his own sin.

But yet he hoped—hoped with the desperation of a criminal scaffold-bound, for whom a release is possible so long as life be left to him. Irion might soften, and with a loving woman's mercy take him back to her at last. He would be patient; he would be gentle with her in all their dealings wherein society bade them work together. He would wait.

But the torture of it! The agony of seeing her shrink when he came near her, and shudder if by accident he touched her. To hear the metallic ring in her voice when she spoke to him; and to know his own guilt. To feel that nothing but mercy remained for him—or pity! Aye, he would accept pity from her now, if she would give it to him; pity, that out of it love might perchance grow before the end.

Who says that our sins are not the pun-

ishers of themselves? Who does not believe in purgatory?

About this time also another change was being wrought in the destiny which Irion had believed hers—*once*. She believed nothing now, trusted nothing, hoped nothing—she only ‘got through’ her days as best she might.

It was Gilbert Hurst, who, all unknown to himself, stepped in upon her life to complete the change which Ulric Aylmer had begun. Not yet—the results of things are not immediate. Time develops them. This was only the beginning of an end.

Gilbert had dined with them one evening, and afterwards he went out to walk with Irion in the gardens.

Ulric Aylmer stayed at home. Irion was glad to be away from him, out of his sight and hearing, out of the necessity to act a toleration she did not feel. Not for worlds would she that Gilbert Hurst should read the story of her life’s failure, and turn to pity her. She had all the pride of a Floyd about her still, as well as all the prejudice. Pity! pity

from an outsider! would have brought her self-respect down to the very dust. Any suffering borne alone were better than to become an object of friendly pity! above all, the pity of one like Gilbert Hurst.

'I've a surprise for you,' he said to her suddenly, as they turned down a side-path, to get away from the people; 'kept it for dessert. What should you say to bidding me "a fond adoo" for ever?'

'I should be very sorry,' she answered. What else could she say?

'Oh, you *would* be sorry. That's some consolation—selfish perhaps, but pleasant. The long and the short of it is, Mrs. Lewis, that you will have to go to the expectant arms of your mother—no, by Jove!—mother-in-law-country, without yours faithfully, Gilbert Hurst.'

'What *do* you mean?'

'I mean that I am going to plant myself in my native soil once more, and see how it will agree with me after ten years of knocking about.'

'Well?'

‘Well! Is that all the interest you take in my doings?’

‘I meant, go on with your story. What more flattering than to wish to know the end? It speaks for the interest in itself.’

But there was little enough of interest shown in Irion’s tone.

‘It’s not the end, it’s the beginning. Grandest lark out! You see before you, madam, a young man who is about to become a public character! proprietor, madam, of a what-you-may-call-em, which is to set London—no, madam—*the world*, in blazes! A regular “blow ’em up boys and no charge for gunpowder” affair!’

‘How absurd you are! What is it all about? I hope you know that I haven’t understood one word, as yet.’

‘Seriously then—Vere Penrose, Esquire, F.C.I.—know what F.C.I. means?’

‘No.’

‘First Class Idiot—and Gilbert Hurst, Esquire, second ditto, ditto, are going shares in the proprietorship of a newspaper! (Penrose always suffered from newspaper on the



brain, you know.) By Jove! the disease has broken out in full force now. He's been and gone and spent the Lord knows what on premises, and machines, and the whole boiling of it; and we are going to set up as destroyers of public and private character—in paragraph! Your likeness for sixpence, gentlemen! guaranteed recognisable, discrepancies don't count! and there you are! Your humble servant is to be chief photographer, and part proprietor, and the dickens knows what besides—on the “all pay and no work” system, of course. No one would be such a fool as to accept any other in these days.'

'But!' in the greatest astonishment; 'but what do you know about it?'

'Penrose thinks himself no end of a card on a newspaper. The *Times* published six letters of his on the Bicycle Grievance, you see, and drew answers to them all! Penrose is a shining light of the *gilded* Radical order—quite another thing that than Radicalism in the rough, please understand—and the end of it all is, that Penrose has persuaded me to chuck up the *Melbourne Express*, and we

are going to astonish London with the brilliancy of our colonial-nurtured ideas! What say you?

‘Theoretically, brilliant; practically, dull, I should say, knowing the workmen.’

She laughed; but somehow, even to him, it did not seem her old glad laugh of very joyfulness; there was a false note in it somewhere, only Hurst could not yet say in which key.

‘All very well for you to sneer at my works,’ he answered. (‘Not that I mind the cut-up, seeing that you’ve never read a word of them.’) But ask Lewis if I wasn’t considered a cheese on the old staff.’

Lewis! How the false name jangled in her ears and jarred on her nerves, making her start with actual pain. Lewis! Bah! it seemed to give her a part in his crime, instead of making her its victim. And yet it were possible she might be thankful to it some day, as a way out of her bondage; if ever she should be goaded to fight for freedom; if in some future she should elect to face publicity rather than hold herself Ulric Aylmer’s wife—

some future which should have driven her to madness with its falseness. She was young now, and strong; she could suffer and be still. But a day might come in which, her strength failing her suddenly, she would purchase freedom at any price.

Gilbert Hurst gave her no time to think.

'Well,' he remarked, 'I've been exercising my patience to hear you say you are sorry to lose the prospect of my society over the way, but evidently you don't seem to see it.'

'Oh yes, of course, I'm sorry—grieved! distressed! despairing!—anything else you like to apply as balm for your poor wounds!'

'But you'll survive, eh?'

'I think not,' comically.

'For my sake,' with tragic emphasis.

'For your sake, then.'

They turned a sharp angle of the garden at that moment, and found themselves face to face with—Mrs. Betrix!

She was perfectly composed; greeted Irion with polite formality, and then remarked to her brother:

'So I have found you at last, Gilbert! They



told me that you were in the gardens, which was not very explicit, had I not possessed the intellect to guess the spot you would probably choose. Nevertheless, I have been hunting for some time. Better late than never. The matter is urgent, Gilbert, or I would not have *disturbed* you,' pointedly. 'You are wanted at home *immediately*. Your father has important business with you, which will not bear postponing even for an hour. He was about to send James for you ; but as I was just starting for my drive, and going to pass Mrs. Lewis's, I undertook to deliver the message, which is—let me repeat it—"Say to Gilbert, it is imperative; he shall return at once ; a gentleman is waiting to see him." Now I have done my part. Your husband well, I hope?' turning to Mrs. Lewis.

'Thank you, quite.'

'I won't detain you. I am on my way to spend the evening with my dear friend Lady Kingslake—you met her, I believe, at our house—charming woman—so intellectual.'

'I met her daughter, Lettice, several times. Remember me kindly, will you? Good-bye.'

‘Good-bye. Remember, Gilbert, I have delivered my message; if you neglect it, the fault is not mine.’

And Mrs. Betrix was gone.

‘Your sister heard us talking rubbish,’ Irion said to Gilbert. ‘I am sure of it, by the expression of her face and the dry tone of her voice. She will pretend to take it all seriously. I like to see virtue on stilts. What a joke!’

‘Not so sure about the pretending, though, and as for a joke, Agatha never understood a joke in her life—some people can’t—they would have the whole world a Gospel to be read through green spectacles.’

‘It amuses them—we need not begrudge your sister her satisfaction in our wrongdoings. There seems to be a great deal of pleasure to be got out of that kind of thing, judging by the numbers who indulge in it.’

‘I say, Mrs. Lewis! By Jove! I didn’t think you were so susceptible to bad influences! It’s easy enough to see who’s been your master.’

‘What in?’ stupidly.

‘Satire. I always knew that husbands

and wives grew a family likeness to each other; but I thought it took time in the developing.'

'Was I satirical?' she answered, not heeding the other part of his speech. 'I didn't know it. I hate satire; it always hurts somebody's feelings. We need not be ill-natured to be clever. If I have a tendency that way, I shall set a watch over my tongue. Talking of satire—is Naomi come back from Switzerland yet?'

'Don't think so—comes next week, *I believe*; but it's not fashionable to know your own movements, still less that other people should know them.'

'What brought the Busy *B* back before the others?' (Busy *B* was Gilbert's surname for Agatha Betrix.)

'Haven't you found out yet that she's one of those early dicky-birds, who always manage to delicately pick up the worm from under the very nose of your idle apprentice?—and she takes care to let him see too what a jolly fat prize he has lost, by comparing her own sleekness with his thinness for ever after.'

‘I don’t consider Mrs. Betrix a boaster.’

‘No, by Jove! She never *says* anything; she only puts herself quietly side by side with her victim whenever opportunity offers, and leaves the world to remark the difference between them—her self-made fatness and your self-made leanness. The result of that early worm, you see, gentlemen!’

Irion laughed at his joke, and for the moment felt her old self again.

He was certainly an amusing companion, not so much because of what he said, but for the manner of the saying; the excessive dryness of his tone, and graveness of his manner; the serio-comic expression of his face, with its charm of ever changing ugliness, and the absolute good-nature of the man, even when he tried to be cutting, as now.

No doubt he was very wild, as his family said, and very slangy, and altogether a disreputable member of society. But Irion liked him. She was far more sorry than she had allowed to him, that he would not be with them in Australia—one refreshing drop falling now and again upon the desert dryness of her

life. One friend in a new country where she would stand alone—utterly alone now—so alone, that if separation were possible, she would have refused to go out of England with Ulric Aylmer. But it was not possible. The money was his, and she could only live where he willed her to live. She could not go back home again—they would not receive her, for she could never explain what stood between her and her husband. They had old-fashioned ideas of wifely ties and wifely duties ; they would refuse her, with the text that what God has joined together, it is not man's to put asunder. And in their righteousness they would cast her out—they and others. Truly, the mammon of unrighteousness might receive her into their houses ; but Irion did not choose to sink to the level of unrighteousness. She would rather bear.

For a moment she had thought of earning self-support, but that were not possible either. The world would doubt her honesty of purpose in leaving her husband, and doubting, refuse to hold out a helping hand to her. No ; she was bound to him, bound by neces-



sity now, in the place of the old willing love. And because of her bondage she was sorry that Gilbert Hurst was not going with them to Australia. He would have lightened it with his boyish gaiety and joking. But Irion was too wise to show him her regret, knowing that men are always prone to flatter themselves upon a woman's interest.

For another half hour she walked with Gilbert Hurst. It was so much fresher in the garden than in the house. They only returned when it grew dark and cold in the September night wind. Gilbert had not been over anxious to answer his father's call ; perhaps he knew his father, and his father's weakness, or Mrs. Betrix's influence over him. At any rate, he made no haste home. He only left Irion on the door-step as she went in for the night. Not gladly—there was no more gladness in coming home for her, but instinctively, as the beasts creep into their dens for shelter.

## CHAPTER VII.

HOPE is long-suffering, but it is not immortal. In the end it dies with the rest.

Ulric Aylmer, after a month of torture-filled longing, longing and hoping, found the old refrain of *nevermore ! nevermore !* ringing like a passing bell over him ; ringing by day and by night, and maddening him with its monotonous emptiness.

She loathed him—loathed him more and more as the days went by. Why then should he torture her anylonger? Why not leave her, and go back to the old life ?—the old hopeless, objectless life, such as the beasts of the field live, who have no to-morrow and no yesterday. Yes—he had decided now ; he would call upon her once again for pity, and then—pass out of her life.

So one evening he sought her in the twilight. He found her sitting, half-asleep, getting rid of the hours in blank forgetfulness—if so be that she might forget. They were long enough, these hours, and empty enough now, to make the days of man centuries instead of years—now, when she would fain rush through them to the end—any end, no matter what, so long as it should bring her release from the bonds which bound her to Ulric Aylmer.

A more thoughtless woman than Irion would have considered of running away from him, and so freeing herself, forgetting that there is no evil so great that it cannot be made greater by foolishness.

It is easier to bear your burden alone and secretly than to have all the world offering to help you carry it, because, forsooth, they would fain take a peep inside it, to find out for their delight what uncleanness had weighted it so heavily.

And Ulric Aylmer knew that because of all this she was what she was to him—obedient and time-serving. But he could give her



what she could not safely take—her freedom. He could remove from her the burden of his presence about the house. He, going of his own free will, could leave her blameless in the arms of society. He could grant her release.

He had come to offer it.

‘Irion,’ he said, standing opposite to her, leaning against the window-frame, and grasping the back of a small chair, as if he would crush it in pieces to lessen his agony, ‘will you speak to me a few moments, dear one?’

All his deepest tenderness was in his voice. But it only moved her to disgust.

‘Yes; I am doing nothing,’ she answered, coldly.

‘Is there no mercy for me still, Irion? Does not the knowledge that you are my wife make you wish to deal gently with my sins, even though they are against yourself?’

‘It is not that,’ quickly. ‘Oh no, if that were all, I could so easily forget, but——’

‘What then?’

‘The other,’ shuddering.

‘The old story,’ less tenderly, ‘the old

*prejudice.* I tell you, Irion, that if your *other* were the beginning and end of my crime, I should not crave even for your mercy. It is because I have wronged *you*—deceived *you*—that I grovel at your feet ; seeing you spurn me, yet, dog-like, coming to you again and again. But it is over now. This is the last time you see me crouching. But, Irion, I am pleading for your love, your dear love, and for my own salvation. Can you not take me back to you, and finish the good work you had begun ?

He held out his hands towards her, but she turned her face away.

‘Perhaps, by-and-by, in the course of years, I shall get—get accustomed to it,’ she answered him.

‘And by then the old love will be dead.’

‘If so, we must live without it. People have had to do so before this.’

‘People !—Irion !—*Can you? Can I?*’

‘I suppose I can.’

‘And I can *not*. I *can* put you away from me, once and for ever, out of my sight ; but I can *not* see you shrink at my touch—and

live.' A pause. Then, with suppressed agony, and an intensity of pleading, as if for very life: 'Would you like me to leave you, Irion—to go back to Australia, and let you alone for ever?'

'How were such an arrangement possible?' she asked, and a look of gladness came into her face.

All his hopes were at an end. He grew sterner than she now; and only the bitterest sarcasm remained to answer her.

'I do not add *pauperism* to my other sins. You shall have your establishment, here—I mine there. You can *account* for my absence. Encourage a fiction that I have only gone away to wind up my affairs. Say—well, say that I have decided to settle in England. Say I shall be back again in—a year; that's safe ground, and will give us time before troubling ourselves to invent something new. I may be dead before the necessity arises. You don't answer me!'

A month ago his tone would have cut her to the heart; now she scarcely noticed it.

'If it could be done without exciting

suspicion,' doubtfully. 'I don't wish to be a subject for scandal or pity, or even speculation. I would rather go with you than become public property on such terms.'

'Your money will protect you—have no fear. A handsome house, carriages, servants, and a female dragon to guard you, will set you beyond suspicion. I can arrange it all for you. I and our lawyer.'

'As you will,' wearily.

'No, no; as you will, Irion,' tenderly again.

'I? Oh, I would rather—yes.'

'Have you considered? Are you quite sure—sure that I am hateful to you?'

His voice had fallen so low she could scarcely catch the words. She did not answer him, but he saw by her face that it was so.

'After all, you are right,' he said, and turned away, that she should not see the signs of his weakness.

He would have left the room, only some desperate hope that she would change even now possessed him. Presently he added, more to himself than to her :

‘But come what may I have been blessed, I have lived and loved—Irion—wife—and you—you must needs forgive.’

‘I have nothing to forgive,’ she answered, staring into vacancy. ‘It is not because you kept the secret from me that I have changed towards you, but because of the nature of the secret itself. Anything else, any other crime under the sun I could forget, except——’

‘You need not say the word—it has accused me for itself quite often enough. Nevertheless, I tell you again, if that crime stood alone, if it had not been followed by this other against you, I could now in this moment hold myself almost guiltless—by comparison.’

She shook her head. She would not argue with him about this. To her the brand of Cain alone made him hideous ; it could not be washed out, or hidden, or endured. And being so, she judged it better for him that he should not see the signs of her loathing. She had no wish to pain him where pain could be avoided, or to triumph over his misery ; because there was no doubt that he was the



sinner, she the sinned against, and that he could only ask mercy at her hands.

There was no such sweet unction as triumph that Irion would lay to her soul. Triumph over fallen manhood, which is the glory of some women. Irion was sorry for him, and would spare him all she might of pain. Therefore she said :

‘Stay if you like, if you would be happier here.’

‘But do you wish me to stay?’ eagerly.

‘I wish you to do what will be best for yourself.’

‘And you——’

‘I—I—oh! I shall find occupation and amusement. I don’t intend to idle away my life as I have done for the last month.’

He saw that she was fencing with him, that in misplaced mercy she was hesitating to thrust a bared sword into him, and so end his misery. He must do it for himself, that was all.

‘I will leave you, Irion; I see you would choose it to be so. To-night I will go away. All the rest can be written. We need not

make two partings. Good-bye, Irion—wife—dear one.'

He bent over her, and put his arms about her and kissed her, and felt—oh God!—that it could be so—felt her shudder and shrink from him, and then compel herself to passive acceptance of his parting kiss. But he was full of love unutterable, and misery unbearable, and in his kiss his whole strong nature had gone out to her with a silent cry for pity.

And she had only loathed him!

He was gone. She sat there staring at the closed door, and feeling relieved. She could breathe more freely, now that the burden of his presence was taken from her—the necessity to feign *toleration*. Whether she ever saw him again, or never, it would not trouble her. He was nothing to her but the Ulric Aylmer of her childhood's terror—Aylmer of the village tragedy. The faithless lover of Bessie Smith, the murderer of James Hobb, the outcast from all neighbourly sympathy.

But this Bessie—this Elizabeth—what of her? Did Irion hate this servant who had come to her to serve her, but instead had

stood between her and her happiness, to break it down for ever. Elizabeth who, after her work was done, had disappeared, leaving no trace of her whereabouts? No—with the perversity of a woman's nature, Irion would make a heroine of this poor servant, who twenty years ago had loved and fallen, and been forsaken (so said the people of Aylmer), and yet had refused to give evidence against her one time lover, losing herself rather for his sake; and afterwards—the people said again—taking her own life in her misery. The people were wrong there; Irion knew that now. She might have asked whether in other matters they were not also astray. But she did not. One thing she knew, and that was enough—Ulric Aylmer was a murderer. Elizabeth had been wronged with herself; more than herself, perhaps, if measure could be made between them. Elizabeth was to be pitied, not blamed.

Irion's wish now was to find the woman. To tell her of her sympathy, and that there was no anger against her for the part she had played, all unconsciously and unwillingly—the



part of Ulric Aylmer's betrayer, and the robber of Irion's peace.

But Elizabeth had left no trace of the path she had taken. She had gone away in a cab, and carried her box with her, saying no word of her destination to any in the house.

But Irion, making plans for her future, determined to seek out this fellow-sufferer, and to be kind to her if she might; that Elizabeth should know there was at least sympathy between them. Sympathy for the past, and good-will for the future. Irion could at least do her the substantial good of setting her without the pale of the changes and chances of a life of much serving and little thankfulness. Money would do that for her, directly or indirectly—and to a share in Ulric Aylmer's money Elizabeth had undoubtedly a right, Irion argued, looking at things with Aylmer-born eyes, and not knowing that Elizabeth had cast him off, throwing before his feet the first stumbling-block of his later fall.

For there is no power in heaven or on earth which will send men to their destruction like

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unto the crushing power of despised love. Love, honest and true, scorned in a moment when acceptance had been doubly dear, because of the price paid for it.

## CHAPTER VIII.

So Irion was alone the next day, breakfasting alone, to sup alone—alone for all the days to come. She was not sorry, and she was not glad. She had grown quite heartless of late. Well for her that it was so, or she had gone mad, looking beyond at the life which lay before her. She was a Lady Macbeth, without a Lady Macbeth's triumph, knowing her husband a murderer, herself an abettor because a concealer of his crime ; but loathing him, and loathing herself, and crouching craven at the feet of social necessities.

And this was all the good which could come to her for living !

She had had a letter from him by the early post. In it he told her that he should be in London for yet another month to see arrange-

ments made for her future. 'A letter addressed to the lawyer will always reach me,' he wrote.

Was he hoping still?

'But I shall not see you again unless you wish it,' the letter went on; 'there will be no *necessity* for a meeting. You must find a home for yourself at once; wherever and of whatever kind you will—money is no consideration. My income varies from eighteen to twenty thousand a year. It is all yours—spend it how you will. You had better see Hawson about it; he will explain everything. But I cannot leave England till I have seen you (from afar off) settled in a house of your own. You will forgive me for wishing to carry away with me a distinct picture of you and your surroundings. To look upon it will be the only pleasure left me. You shall not know that I am watching you, dear one; neither shall the watching last. I give you my word of honour—will you credit me with such a possession?—that I will go back to Australia as soon as I have seen you settled, and that I will never return to you, unless

you call me back. But Hawson will always know where I am ; and if I die, he will advise you of it.

‘I believe you could disprove our marriage, if you wish to do so. But I fancy I know you better, Irion. However, in all your future life, consider only what will make yourself happy.’

And he wrote more about her change of houses, and the necessity for immediate action in the matter of finding another. And Irion read the letter from beginning to end without a pang ! She did not seem to realise that it was still left him to *suffer*, if all else were gone from him—perchance because she herself had not suffered much active pain in all this. It is sympathy which makes us merciful.

But she obeyed him. And after breakfast she took up the *Times* to look for houses to be sold or let. And she ordered her carriage for the afternoon, that she might drive to some agents and ask help from them in this business.

Irion decided to live in London—for every



reason. There was distraction here from the morbid thoughts which she knew would presently pursue her. She had friends within reach. The Hursts, and others known through them—and Gilbert. Yes, she had forgotten that Gilbert was not going back to Australia. Gilbert would rouse her, and distract her, and amuse her sometimes, when she was in a mood to be amused. Now for the first time she felt glad that he had entered into that newspaper folly of young Penrose's.

Then, in the same cold way, Irion set herself to plan and draw out her little fiction about her husband's return, so that, should people question her, she might be ready with her answers, and have nothing hidden for them to dig out in broken bits.

'Well,' she would say, 'we have both decided that it will be pleasanter to live in England; but Claud'—she mustn't forget to say Claud—'cannot settle down without first returning to Melbourne to wind up his affairs there.'—'How long will he be away?'—'That must depend upon how the affairs arrange themselves. Nine months, perhaps, or a

year; scarcely less, but there was no knowing.'—'Would she not be very dull and miserable during his absence?'—'No, oh no; certainly not; she should try to amuse herself as much as possible. Time goes so quickly when one is amused!' and so forth. It was all true, so far as the words went, and Irion told herself that it was only another of those polite fictions of which life—aye, the very honestest—is mostly composed.

There is a difference in degree, but we are all liars—unless we would be as the savages, and slay one another instead. But *liars* is an ugly word; let us use another—actors. Or, if we object to the rouge and the tinsel which this implies, let us flatter ourselves—diplomatists. The title will suit some of us well. But some of us are fools; nevertheless, fools *will* try to be wise, and so the play goes on.

Therefore, after lunch, Irion went out house-seeking; went as if nothing drove her, as if not necessity but pleasure sent her forth to choose her own home, unconstrained by the will of a husband. And after a long

search she found what she wanted, money being no part of the question. It is always easier to do things on a large scale than on a small. And Irion's new mood was to be lavish of all that should give her respectability, and a place amongst the unimpeachable. Let the world see for itself, and so save her the trouble of saying that her husband had left her to hold up her head in its midst. That there would be no pity required of it for her loneliness, or forbearance with her for lack of the wherewithal to obey its mandates. No; she would come forward and swell the pageant, and be glorified for her share in its magnificence.

And this was the Irion of six months ago!

It is so true that we are only what circumstances make of us. Who can deny that Irion gave fair promise of brave womanhood? Behold her now!

So the house was bought and garnished with reckless fancifulness. And Irion set herself down in the very midst of the fashionable world. What better, in the place of love and hope, and all youthful foolishness? It



was only November ; by next season she would have everything ready for her own 'coming out.' All the chains forged which would compel her world to servitude. Her world, which she knew would be mistrustful of her, questioning her rights. Her world, which should presently be disarmed by her, and bow its head penitent before her.

And the dragon ! How about the dragon, of which Ulric Aylmer had made mention, as a guardian of her good name ? He was right. Some tame beast must be found to sit by her side, grinning upon her, and showing its teeth before all comers ; looking terrific, but neither growling, nor snapping, nor otherwise obtruding itself. Yes ; she would have a dragon, since she had no idea of letting evil tongues wag against her.

It was not by dancing breakdowns in tights and false calves that Irion was going to compel the favour of her audience. She had no taste for low comedy at any time. She might sin—being human—but she would sin cleanly, for the honour of her womanhood.

So after having chosen her house, she sought

about for a Cerberus to guard it. Should she have someone she knew, or a stranger? It was a weighty matter, affecting her life. Should she advertise for that long-suffering domestic animal—a companion, or should she ask a relation to come and growl for her, and keep the wolves off the doorstep? This last would carry more weight with it than the other. Relations are approved by society, especially relations with a name; they are a better guarantee for respectability than personal virtue. Would Eleanor come? Irion wondered. Eleanor, with her smooth hair and linen collars. Eleanor, with her five-and-thirty years and her awe-inspiring carriage—her Dorcas societies and her Missions. She was a very inoffensive person in a house—if liberally allowanced with dirty children to clean—little polluted sepulchres to white after her own fashion. There was no lack of dirt, moral and substantial, in London; and, for the cleaning materials, how easy to supply them with a purse well filled and a table well covered! Eleanor could be 'let out' to some penurious curate, as substantial helpmate in

his good works. That were to ensure her happiness, fulfilling the yearning of her soul from the day of its awakening. Eleanor, who, living with heaven before her eyes, was not content to take herself there alone, but would lead in with her a whole flock of wandering sheep, which but for her gathering together had rushed blindly to their own destruction.

Yes, if Eleanor could be induced, with this New Jerusalem before her, to come to London and take upon herself the old duty of 'looking after that thoughtless Irion,' as she used to say, all would be well for them both.

'Miss Floyd lives with her,' the world would say. 'The Floyds of Rockford, you know—she is her sister.' And so the world is silenced.

Irion had little doubt that Eleanor would be willing to come. With the excuse of a duty to be done, what religious woman, pleasant to look upon, and with some vestiges of youth still hanging about her, would not, after five-and-thirty years of entombment in

Rockford—and with the permission of the Church—disinter herself for the good of the many going straightway to perdition?

So Irion wrote to Eleanor, setting before her that in London there lay a field with two distinct paths of duty calling upon her to follow them. One, the social duty of protecting a sister from the mud-balls which an unbelieving society might blow upon her, defenceless. The other, to help in the rescuing of street-arabs and wanderers from out of the claws of the ravening wolves which (in London) are for ever going about seeking whom they may devour.

And Irion (quite casually) made mention of a certain vicar of her parish, who wanted labourers in his vineyard, he having no wife or family to help in his good works! And Irion wrote of Mrs. Betrix, who delighted in large charities! of Naomi, who was indolently generous! and of herself, who would supply her sister with everything she wanted, regardless of kind or cost, in return for her presence as a 'certificate of respectability.' Altogether, the prospect was a pleasing one; with duty

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as its mainspring, and religion as its support.

And Irion had not miscalculated.

Eleanor Floyd accepted.



## CHAPTER IX.

ULRIC AYLMER was once more lost to the world and to himself. London held him still, but he was hidden like a night-beast from the sunlight. Only the stars saw his prowlings. He was afraid lest Irion should come across him, and look upon him with that look of loathing which had met him of late, and so to-morrow should find him gone to a coward's death. But he watched her, and by night he hung about her house, and he learned to know it, and the street in which it was, and even the people who surrounded her. He knew the colour of her horses, and the livery of her servants, and the make of the dresses she wore—moving with the fashion. And so at last the picture was complete in all its shadings.

Next week he should go away, carrying it with him, to look upon it hourly, out in the western wilds. Not to work and civilisation should he return, but back, far back, to the old, old life of a hunter and of a savage. Back to the company of the beasts of the field, on whom he could prey as another beast, hunting them to their death that he might find pleasure still in living. *Sport*—yes; he could set up his intellect against the intellect of the brutes, and see which would win in the end! Verily, a noble triumph.

As to the drama which he had written, it was to him a dead and buried letter, forgotten as if it had never been. They were going to act it in London in the beginning of the season. The men and the women who would play it were the first caste in London. They had only to lift their curtain on a piece, to make it at least popular—‘the talk’ of the season. They had known a great work when they saw it, and cared nothing that the author had no *name*. They could give him a name, or support the play well enough without his help, if it pleased them. It was a subject

which had taxed their utmost powers in the handling, that in the end sweet human mercy should be compelled to season human justice, and even a sinner find brotherly pity as the winding-sheet which men should wrap about his corpse.

Irion had not read that play; it was already out seeking its fortune when she married, and if she asked him of the story, he would bid her wait patiently and see for herself. 'It won't bear telling,' he said. Perhaps he intended it to reveal something to her, she thought then, something of that youthful folly which had borne him such bitter fruit. God! how far she had been from interpreting that *folly*! And so she had been anxious for the coming out of that play—once.

She also had forgotten it now.

Ulric Aylmer was living in a second-rate private hotel, in one of the streets leading out of Oxford Street. He should be less likely to meet old or new acquaintances here. Irion had, no doubt, said that he was on his way back to Melbourne. And he would not let action of his contradict her. Soon enough he

should be where she would fain know him, with the seas lying between her and him; but his work was not yet quite done. A few days yet remained to him before he should be gone from her for ever. He was even now living in a fool's paradise, hoping still that she would call him back to her. But the days were passing away, and he only saw her as a stranger from afar off, she being all unwitting of his presence.

He was at breakfast one morning in the faded hotel coffee-room. He had gone to bed in the greyness of the dawn, and came down in the midday sunshine, breakfasting at eleven o'clock, that the hours of the day might be lessened.

He had nothing to do but to pay a visit to Mr. Hawson, the lawyer, later in the afternoon. That was one hour filled out of the whole! He was only existing till the day of his going should come round, and call him into action. He should thank it now as the end.

He was still taking his tea and reading the *Times*, when they brought him word that 'a

lady was asking for him.' She would not come up into the coffee-room, they said, and had been shown into an unused private sitting-room. 'If he would be so good as to follow the waiter.'

'She has come!' he told himself, going up the stairs—'my own—my wife.'

And in a moment his hell became a heaven spread out before him. He walked quickly, for the winds of a great joy were blowing about him, and knitting up his strength and his courage. Hope? *No—certainty.* There was no other woman who would ask for him. She had found mercy at last.

'Irion, Irion!' he said, as the waiter held open the door, and he passed into the room.

Her back was towards him, but she turned as he spoke.

It was Elizabeth!

He had not looked; he had only felt certain—so certain—and he had cried out to her in his joy, and he was mocked by the echo of reality.

'You expected Mrs. Aylmer,' Elizabeth said simply, not attempting any kind of greeting.



'But if you must know, I'm not over sorry to find you alone. There's a selfish thing for you! I always was selfish, you know. Well, never mind; it won't hurt you now.'

'How did you find me out?' he asked, for something to say, as she had stopped speaking.

'See what a little determination will do! I wanted to tell you something—called at the lodgings—found you both gone off—asked where you might be gone to—got the address—went off to Carlisle Terrace—was told by the servant there that you were gone back to Australia, and only Mrs. Lewis (he called her) at home. Not that I believed one word of it, you see.'

'Yes; but they did not give you my address!' surprised.

'Bless you! women are no fools. Thinks I to myself: "The tenants at Aylmer pay their rent to someone, and someone pays it to you; so someone, whoever he may be, knows your movements. Good—I must find someone." I had a pound or two in my pocket, so what do I do but go straight off to Aylmer. No one who used to know me lives there now, or if



they do, I'm not much like what I was then ; anyhow, it wouldn't have much mattered if anybody had found me out. Well, the long and short of it is, I got out of one of your farmers—Long by name—the address of a certain Mr. Hawson in London. So back I go—find out this Mr. Hawson—tell him my business, and ask him to give me your address, which he did ; and here I am ! What do you think of that, now, for determination ?

‘ Worthy of a better object. What did you come to tell or ask me ?’

‘ First, I should like to know what's up between you two, that you should have gone off all of a sudden like this. What's it all about, eh ?’

‘ What about ?’ he asked, smiling, notwithstanding his heaviness of heart. He had not remembered this blunt off-hand manner of speech in the Bessie of old.

How time wipes out the nimbus which our youthful pencil threw around the portrait of one we drew in love !

‘ Why, about you going to Australia, and

her staying here, of course,' Elizabeth answered.

'I am going, that's all. There's nothing to tell.'

'You don't mean to say she has taken a leaf out of my book—and turned you off?'

'She would rather I left her—yes.'

'Then you didn't tell her?'

'I did.'

'All the whole lot of it?'

'All she cared to hear. She would not know your secrets—and she was right, after all. What good could it have done?'

'Why, set you right in her eyes, of course.'

'No explanation can undo what is done. Unless the crime were not, she would never take me back to her. You have only to look back at your own view of the matter, Bessie. And you knew more than she could ever know in my favour.'

'Yes, but then I was a fool; and I don't believe she is one. What could you expect from a vain stuck-up little village girl, who didn't scarcely know her A B C? If I had to

go over it again *now*, knowing a thing or two more, I should act different. Mrs. Aylmer is a lady born.'

Her voice broke slightly, and tears filled her eyes. He did not see them, being altogether self-absorbed, and she struggled bravely to keep them from falling. Now, at least, Elizabeth was no fool, and she knew that sentiment and romance do not sit well on a woman of six-and-thirty years, calling forth contempt rather than interest. The fact was, that Elizabeth had not been disillusioned, as had Ulric Aylmer. What she had fancied he would be, such she had found him. Outwardly changed, but the same man. The man she had loved, truly loved, for all that she had refused to be his wife after his sin, which he sinned for her. She did not love him now, as then, but he stood apart in her life, and above. No man had pushed him aside out of her heart. There was no passion left for him, but only memory. Memory, and pity, and a great desire to serve him, atoning, if may be, for her past.

'Well, now,' she went on, 'what I want to know is whether you actually forbid me to go

to Mrs. Aylmer, and try what I can do to make her come round. May I tell her my own story, in my own way ?

‘ If she will hear it.’

‘ Oh, I’ll answer for that. All women are curious, I can tell you, and you’re not going to make out that she’s anything different to the rest of us.’

‘ She *is* different.’

‘ Oh, come now !’

And Elizabeth laughed with more good will than refinement. She was no heroine, poor thing. Only a common village girl who had been forced into acting a part in a romance, and acting it very badly too, so far as effect went. She was a servant, working for her bread as other servants work, content if she could earn enough money to appear well-dressed on Sunday with the rest. But she had a heart ; and some of us have not.

‘ All right then,’ she said, well-pleased that he had not sternly forbade her help. ‘ And you promise not to turn-to and abuse me for putting my finger into your pie ?’

‘ No ; only you will do no good.’

'But I shan't do any harm—shall I?' anxiously. 'I've done quite enough of that already. I wish to goodness I had never come across you!' Again the break in her voice.

'It would have been known sooner or later. The fault is not yours, Bessie,' he said, speaking very kindly, for now he noticed that she was grieved. He would have her know that he felt he owed her at least sympathy, because of the love which had been between them.

'But it's my doing, for all that, and if I can undo it I will—if it takes me all my life --there.'

'Thanks,' he said, holding out his hand to her. He knew how powerless she would find herself, and he was sorry for her disappointment.

'When are you off?' she asked bluntly, putting her hand in his, as if to say good-bye.

'On Saturday.'

'Not too much time—is there?'

'Time enough for me, Bessie. I wish it were to-morrow.'





I didn't know what was the chances of my coming across you or her out there; and whether, if by any ill-luck I did—whether she would fancy anything wrong. You know what I mean,' nervously. 'Is she the sort to get jealous, or anything? Some people would, you see, if they found you and me out in Australia together—and what I came to say was this: If there's any chance of her coming across me, and making a fuss about it, *I won't go*. But it's a good place, good wages, and all that, only—well, you know best—what do you say about it?

'She is not going, so she is no longer the question. It was good of you to remember her.'

'And what about yourself? Shall you mind?'

'Mind! no. Why should I? Besides, I shall not be in Melbourne, or near Melbourne.'

'Where then?'

'In the bush—if you know what that means.'

'Oh yes, I know. Bill—don't you remember Bill?—well, Bill, he turned bushranger,

Elizabeth had faith—faith in her own power. Faith in the good sense of the woman she would persuade. Faith in God's tender mercy for the one sinner that repenteth over the ninety and nine just persons.

ground must lay fallow a little time to get strength; it was brought low by the very fulness of the first crop. By-and-by we will see what a woman's hand can sow—and reap.'

And in this wise Irion was setting herself to forget.

It was winter. But in London even the winter calls us out to make one of a social crowd, if we care to obey. It is strangers and pilgrims in the land who think that London is only London in the spring. There is an inner wheel which turns on for ever, summer and winter alike,—and there is a special wheel which turns only in the winter. *A season* specially made for the dwellers in cities. A season which might almost make the other feel poor, and cold, and laughter lacking. It is a season made expressly for heart-warming and spirit-rejoicing, and rich, unfettered delight. Our dresses may be less costly in November than in June; but the weather is less hot, and we are more disposed to merriment. The *prima donna* may not be in London; but a hundred stars of the second

magnitude give as much brightness to the midnight sky, and our eyes are not too tired to see the modest cluster. In June they are half blinded through the using of strong magnifying-glasses, with which to learn the surpassing magnificence of those specimens which society has set up for our notice to the exclusion of all other.

There are no idols in November.

With her house and her servants and her horses, Irion had 'set up' boxes at the fashionable theatres, stalls at the winter opera, 'places' everywhere. At home she was surrounded with friends—Rockford friends—Aylmer friends—London friends—whom she asked to visit her in quick succession. And this because she would deny herself time to *think*; that amid the calls of to-day, yesterday and to-morrow should alike be non-existent for her.

Eleanor had come, and Eleanor also had leave to ask her own friends to the house how and when she would. Irion had, of course, 'explained' her husband's absence. She had satisfied Eleanor, which was hopeful for the

rest of the righteous world, whose righteousness was of the righteousness of the Pharisees. Not that of these was Eleanor Floyd—and so in her credulity she was—*deluded*. A simple country woman she, with simple ideas of the holiness of marriage vows and bonds, and a simple faith that what God had joined together, it was not man's to put asunder.

And so, early one morning, early for London—too early to be seen abroad—Irion sat at home reading. It was a new sensation novel which she read, with the new absorption she had taught herself for all the new frivolities of fashion.

Eleanor had gone out with the Reverend Peter Alson, to be introduced to his schools and his districts. So Irion was alone.

It was in the early days of her new life, before she had had time to bring a crowd around her in her home. To-morrow the first of a long line of visitors would come to her—to-morrow reality, not novels, should fill up the morning hours of her life. It would be a great delight to her, the showing these country girls—friends of her old Rockford days—the



wonders of London, which used to delight herself once—long ago—oh! so long ago!—a lifetime ago!—last spring.

But she was not able to read much this morning. 'A lady wanted to see her,' she was told by the servant, quite early.

'The dressmaker,' Irion thought, and said they might show her up.

Presently she came. It was Elizabeth.

For a moment Irion did not know her. She had dressed herself with special care, special neatness, and perfect taste. She looked what the servant had called her, 'a lady.' It was not till she spoke that Irion knew her late maid.

'I hope I do not intrude upon you, Mrs. Aylmer,' Elizabeth said, forgetting in her nervousness to use the new name; but she was specially watchful of her speech and manner, that they should be of her best.

'I am glad to see you, Elizabeth. I did not like your going away without speaking to me. Did you think I should be angry with you because of the discovery? I was not. Sit down.' (Elizabeth obeyed.) 'But before



we begin a conversation, let me ask you not to call me Mrs. Aylmer; my name is, and will always be, Lewis. I was introduced to my friends in London under that name, and to change it now would arouse suspicions—now, when, above all times, I wish to avoid questioning.'

Irion was thinking what rapacious things lies are. Once take one and use it, and it demands a dozen others to back it up. 'Truly,' she told herself, with bitter irony, 'it is a pleasing part that I have had thrust upon me!' But aloud she only added:

'You understand me?' smiling graciously.

'Yes, of course; I forgot. You will excuse me, will you not, Mrs. Lewis, for calling upon you?'

'Have I not said I am glad to see you, Elizabeth? You must spend the day here. I think you will like Lucille, your successor; she can speak English. She shall take you to the theatre this evening, if you care to see the pantomime or a play.'

'You are very kind, indeed, Mrs. Lewis, most kind, I am sure; but—but—but I came

here with a purpose, and—and I must go the very moment I have told you. I hope you are not busy, Mrs. Lewis?

Poor Elizabeth was growing very uneasy over her mission, as who would not, having all the introduction on her own hands—and a difficult subject to introduce, too. But she was not a very nervous person, and so fought her way without visible effort.

‘You said you wasn’t angry with me, Mrs. Lewis, and I didn’t think you was, or I shouldn’t have had the face to come here.’

Irion had fancied the woman spoke better English than this. Poor Elizabeth! it was thus her nervousness betrayed itself.

‘And as I have come, I want you to be so very good as to listen to me.’

‘Certainly, Elizabeth. What would you say?’

‘Well, first, you must know I—I—I saw Mr. Aylm—*Lewis*—yesterday. He—he——’

‘Sent you here?’ scornfully.

‘Oh no, *that he didn’t*. He said it wouldn’t do any good my coming. But I felt I must come for all that. I felt I must

tell you the rights of that story—that Aylmer business, you know—and you see it makes all the difference what went before.'

'I rather object to discussing horrors, you must know. Is it necessary? What good will it do?'

'Just this—it might make your husband stand in a better light. I don't say it *will*, mind. But it may.'

'It is good of you to wish him well, but I have his own word that he is guilty. It is enough.'

'But don't you think you might make excuses for him if you knew what led to it?'

'I do know; he told me—anger, passion, rage, call it what you will. I see no *excuse* in this.'

'But if he was right to be angry—if his rage was manly, and honest, and *just*?'

'It could not be manly or honest, to end in the murder of a defenceless rival. A blow from behind, and the victim all unsuspecting. Bah! a coward's deed as well as a crime.'

The look of utter contempt, mixed with

fear, which came into Irion's face as she said this, showed Elizabeth how hard a task she had set herself to do, how unlikely she was to succeed. But she would not give up.

'There was no cowardice in it, Mrs. Lewis, that I can tell you—*none*. A man is never a coward when he is defending a woman.'

'If that were an excuse for murder, Elizabeth, half our criminals were guiltless.'

'Well, I don't know. You see, there was he, going to be married to me in a day or two, the licence got and everything—please forgive me if I am hurting your feelings; you wouldn't understand if I didn't tell you all this, because, you see, a man's promised wife is his own, almost as much as afterwards. Isn't she?'

'Yes; oh yes.'

'Well, he and me, we had been walking in the coppice, talking about our wedding. He loved me then, mind, with all his whole heart, as boys do love—of course, he laughs at it all now—and quite right too; but——'

'No, Elizabeth, he does not laugh; he says he loved you truly and honourably—'

that is one point in his favour. But love ought to be a good influence, not a bad.'

'Yes, of course; but you just listen now; and be a little merciful to him and me, if you can, for it was *my* doing most.'

'You did the murder?' Irion cried, with cruel delight; cruel, if Elizabeth had known the rush of joy which forced the question.

'Not exactly; no—I didn't *do it*; but if it hadn't have been for me *he* would never have done it.'

'Finish your story,' wearily.

'Well, as I was saying, he left me there in the wood—after we had made all our plans for the marriage. He was up to his eyes in love; so was I. Well, he hadn't been gone a minute, when up comes Jim—James Hobb, you know—Jim, he was in love with me too, and wanting me to marry him; but I was afraid of him always. He had followed us, and watched us, and I believe heard what we was talking about. Anyhow, he must needs set to work spooning me, as usual—wanted me to kiss him, and that sort of thing—and I wouldn't. So then, what does he do, but



takes me by force, and kisses me, like the brute that he was, for all his good looks and good name in Aylmer. Then I tried to get away from him, and he threw me down, and I shrieked to Ulric for help, knowing he couldn't be far off. Ulric came running up, and saw me there, and the man holding his hand over my mouth; and then, without thinking of anything at all but me, Ulric hit him over the head with the gun he was carrying. It was only one hit, and the man fell back; and Ulric, without looking at him, dragged me fainting out of the coppice, and I came to in the field outside of it. Then he took me home, for I could scarcely walk, and I had more than a mile to go. And afterwards Ulric left me, and he left his gun in the gun-room (father was Squire Aylmer's gamekeeper, you see), and he went home.

‘When I was going to bed that evening I found I had lost my locket that Ulric gave me; so the next morning at sunrise I went back to the coppice to look for it, and there, to my horror, what did I see but the body of Jim, lying dead and bloody on the ground,



with his head broken open ! Of course, I was in a horrible fright, and sick and faint, for I had never seen a corpse before. I ran away as fast as my legs could carry me. Then, not long afterwards, I heard the people saying that Jim had been murdered ; and after that, policemen came to our cottage, and found the gun, all bloody where it had hit him. And then I heard them call Ulric Aylmer a murderer, and I knew it was true, and I seemed to hate the very idea of seeing him again afterwards. Murderer is such an ugly word, you see, and I was only sixteen. And when I did set eyes on him again, the policeman was with him, and he looked so awful ! I was all the more frightened ; and then people talked, and talked, and said such horrid things about Ulric that I took a sort of turning against him. And the long and short of it was that when the next night he came to me secretly, and told me that he must be off sharp, or he should be put in prison for life, if not hung, and asked me to go off with him to some foreign country, and get married there, I couldn't for the life of

me go. I couldn't screw up my courage to marry a man who might be caught, and brought up for murder any day. I was a downright coward and a fool, that's what I was, and I should act quite different if I had to go over it all again.'

'Would you—*I should not,*' Irion answered very coldly, but very distinctly. And Elizabeth felt her hopes growing weak. 'How hard and unforgiving this woman is, for all her sweet face and manner!' she thought. But then Elizabeth understood nothing of the prejudices of refinement.

To her a crime was horrible because it was a crime, nothing more. For Irion, crime was a shock to all the subtlest sentiments of her education. Crime was vulgar and gross and revolting; and the crimes which were the followers of ungoverned passions lower than the rest.

Elizabeth did not know what to say next; there seemed nothing greater to urge in Ulric Aylmer's defence. If his wife could not forgive a moment of just and manly anger—so Elizabeth rated it now—what would she ever forgive of human weakness?

Elizabeth was right. We cannot analyse our feelings or argue fairly with 'whys' and 'wherefores.' If James Hobb had been a stranger, instead of one Ulric Aylmer was known to hate with a bitter hatred; had Aylmer not loved the girl, and been passionately jealous over her, nothing had worn the aspect it did—the word 'murder' had never passed from lip to lip, and Irion's childhood had not been filled with the village prejudices.

And the village was not wrong, not in a single fact. Only their interpretation went astray. They said that Ulric Aylmer had *planned* to kill James Hobb, waiting hidden for the purpose, and springing upon him as a wolf on a lamb. What mattered it to them that the law had not even been able to *prove* that Ulric Aylmer dealt the death-blow? There were others who might have done it. No eye-witness could be brought forward, for Bessie had disappeared. And so he was let free. What matter? They knew the *truth*, or thought they knew. They were Irion's teachers, and their teaching was now taking effect.

So now, as Elizabeth and she sat there face to face, the whole story was passing through the mind of each. The same in substance, it was yet different in form; but each felt that she had played a part in this tragedy. Elizabeth in the first act, Irion in the second, and—*who* in the third? God knows!

A silence had fallen over them after Elizabeth's story ended. Irion did not feel called upon to speak; no question had been asked of her. Elizabeth would fain have put one, but did not know how to form it, that it should rouse her into a new interest. She was so calm and still.

'And you will let him go all the way out to Australia alone?' Elizabeth pleaded at last, on love's side.

'If he wishes to go. Yes. I have no control over his movements. If he wished to stay, he would stay.'

'Oh, Mrs. Lewis! if you only knew how miserable he is.'

'I am sorry to add to his misery. But I cannot go with him, Elizabeth, if that is what you would see me do. Were anybody

but you speaking, I should request silence on this subject. But I acknowledge your right to feel an interest in him, and to do what you can for him. I only wish I could feel as you feel respecting him; my life would be happier.'

Suddenly the tears rushed into her eyes, and were falling over her cheeks before she could prevent them. It was the first sign of weakness she had shown, 'and must be the last,' she told herself.

But Elizabeth had seen it, and again she hoped. Not for to-day, not for any present, perhaps; she must let things go their own way for the moment. But there lay a future yet before them both; and patience and perseverance to mould it.

Elizabeth decided in this moment that she would not go out to Australia, or anywhere beyond the reach of the work she had set herself to do—the awakening of Irion's mercy, which seemed to lie so dead.

'And what are you going to do with yourself, Elizabeth?' Irion asked presently, intent also on good works.



‘Well, I shall find another place.’

‘Can I help you?’

‘You are very kind; but us servants have got no difficulty in finding places in these days. I remember when it was different.’

‘If you ever want help of any kind, or a friend in need, come to me. We can neither of us deny a share in the life of the other.’

‘I won’t forget. But you must know, Mrs. Lewis, I’m of the free and independent sort. I like to do for myself. But of course it might be that I couldn’t through illness or anything, and if so, I shan’t be too proud to let you know.’

‘That’s right; I am living here, and always to be found.’

‘So I think I’ll go now. And you—you—you won’t be angry if I ask you to think over what I said about—about that affair?’

‘No; I am not *angry*,’ smiling satirically.  
‘Good-bye.’

Irion held out her hand. Elizabeth took it, but awkwardly, for she felt that there *must* be condescension in the familiarity, all unexpressed though it was. She had served Mrs.



Lewis, as a maid, her mistress—the mistress could not forget, Elizabeth knew, and the knowledge made her uncomfortable.

She had failed in her mission too, and felt herself out of place. The drawing-room, with all its costly magnificence, was no place for her, and she felt awkward, wishing only to bring the interview to an end. Nothing had been gained, and she had hoped so much! Ulric Aylmer must go away alone, as he had come. The woman's kindly human heart ached for his desolation. Nevertheless, leaving Irion's house, Elizabeth only said to herself, with unromantic truthfulness:

‘Well, I never! there is no coming round a woman with a crochet! Ulric is right, and she's every bit as big a donkey at five-and-twenty as I was at sixteen!—all fads and fancies—and don't know what's good for her. The idea! give up your husband because he isn't just an angel with wings, and all the lot of it! If I'd married him I'd have stuck by him, no fear of that. But it's better for him I didn't. Gentlemen don't like common women after they've lost their pretty faces.’

And then Elizabeth rubbed her eyes with her hand, for they had grown suddenly dim. And she walked quickly, for she felt cold and miserable.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with me to-day,’ she said. ‘I suppose I’m hungry,’ and she hurried back to her lodgings to dinner.

## CHAPTER XI.

ON Saturday Ulric Aylmer, standing on the deck of the *Beautiful Star*, watched the shores of England slip away from him for the second time 'and the last,' he told himself joyfully. England had been a cursed land for him. He had brought the curse upon himself, but then—is it not always ourselves who are the weavers of our own destiny? We may pass the work into other hands before it is finished, but it started from our own. There is a moment in all our lives when we have held the great wheel motionless in our hands; when it was ours to set it turning towards the right or towards the left, backwards or forwards, according to our will. And as the wheel turned, so was the stuff woven. We cannot unmake it again. We can only patch

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it, and alter it. The patches are an eye-sore, and the alterations cause us pain. But the fault is our own—and we know it.

Ulric Aylmer knew, but he could not annul. He repented, but it was too late. He had only one desperate longing now—to get away. To remove himself out of the sight and sound of this barred Elysium, to lose himself in some Tartarus of his own choosing, to plunge himself under the waters of some new Lethe which should bring to him in the end—oblivion. Nothing greater, nothing better. Only oblivion.

And the one honest thing in his life, the one worthy, the one true—his love for his wife—must die with the rest. The treasure had been won by falsehood and fraud, and now it was confiscated like the others. It was all in the course of justice, ‘But, Irion,’ he cried out, with exceeding bitterness, ‘Irion might have had mercy.’ Only she had not heeded his plea, and now he was gone from her. The seas might cover him, or the wild beasts might devour him, or the pestilence might slay him. He should only thank them



for the rescue. Once he would have freed himself. Once—before he knew Irion; but not now. She should not call him coward; besides. She should have done, at least, one good thing for him. He would live till life gave him up.

And the waters danced at his feet, and the sea-birds screamed overhead, mocking him with their joyfulness.

Well, they were to be his friends now; they and none other. At least they would not taunt him with a past for which memory alone was punishment enough. But even now he only thought of Irion, of the wrong he had done her; that was his crime, and before the hugeness of it the other had faded into absolute nothingness.

And the journey was sure, from beginning to end. Neither storms threatened him, nor fires, nor thirsts; and yet he would have courted all, if with them death might come.

How life clings to us when we would cast it off!

And Ulric Aylmer landed on Australian soil. Gun and rod in hand, and sack

on shoulder, he turned his face towards the west, and simply—walked away. He knew not where, he did not wish to know. He only wished to go out from amidst the haunts of men, out where the beasts and he might struggle together for food and drink, dying together if nature refused to help them, but calling never on man for aid.

And at this time Irion had entered upon her new life. At present she had but one object, to throw gold-dust into the eyes of her fellow-men, that they should not read the story of her life, as it lay printed small between the lines. And people were willing to be blinded with so goodly a material. If they doubted amongst themselves, they were careful not to obtrude those doubts upon society. Mrs. Lewis gave such 'magnificent' balls. Mrs. Lewis's dinners were 'delightful.' Mrs. Lewis herself was beautiful, and a great 'attraction' at their gatherings. Her house was a 'model,' her equipages 'perfect,' her dress 'most original' and 'artistic.'

In short, Mrs. Lewis became—the fashion !

For in these days it is no strange event that a woman's husband should go out to Australia for a year, leaving her to keep up his state at home. And Irion had substantial friends.

The Hursts, known everywhere, and famous for 'their heaped-up money-bags, 'knew all about the husband, and his colonial affairs,' people said. 'Lewis was a newspaper proprietor' (this Gilbert Hurst had told them with unblushing certainty). 'Lewis could not settle in England before seeing his business safely conducted by competent hands.' 'Lewis would be back again before the end of the year, without doubt.' 'Lewis was a delightful fellow.' And Gilbert was no whit ashamed of his story. He had persuaded himself to believe it first, and then he set about to persuade others. But Gilbert Hurst was neither a fool nor blind, and he knew that 'something was up' with Irion and her husband. 'The greater reason,' he argued, 'for swearing till all's blue that things couldn't be more satisfactory!'

Now Gilbert Hurst displayed much wisdom

at this time—more than he would have been credited with by his friends generally. He never allowed himself to be alone with Mrs. Lewis. Often enough he dined with her, danced, rode with her, as before ; but always in company. Mrs. Betrix had opened his eyes. Mrs. Betrix was always letting fall, as if by accident, unpleasant hints as to the nature of his friendship with Mrs. Lewis. At first they had fallen short of their mark, and failed to strike him. But he woke one morning to a sudden knowledge of their ugliness, and from that time he strictly avoided any private meetings with Mrs. Lewis.

It was self-denying of him, very—for he found great pleasure in her company ; and she, not suspecting, so often asked for his companionship, more especially when no one else was with her.

‘I do so hate being alone,’ she would say to him, inviting him to take her here and there, wherever amusement offered. Gilbert was so ‘jolly,’ she told herself, so full of fun, and so easily made happy himself. Nothing

in the way of excitement came amiss with him—and Irion's life was full of excitement just now, full of publicity, fever-filled.

Gilbert had to invent excuse after excuse. He would not tell Irion of Mrs. Betrix's unpleasantness; but he knew that if one woman would say nasty things of her on his account, others were only waiting to follow suit. His affection for Irion was too honest in its kind to risk bringing suspicion upon her for the openness of his friendship.

And Irion had another champion, a silent one, but a true. Naomi put in a word in season in her favour. Cold, proud Naomi, who never troubled herself to like any one—if liking meant active defence. Naomi's undemonstrativeness was well known to society, therefore a few good words from her were of much account with society, sitting in judgment on Irion.

It was with the Hursts' circle of acquaintance that Irion had first set out to race, being already known to most of them. But cleverer than they, she had managed to pass them, to go beyond and above them, in the space of



a few weeks, even before her husband left her.

Now, so long as Irion had floated side by side with herself, Mrs. Betrix stood passively discontented; when she sailed beyond, Mrs. Betrix broke into active rebellion. Irion was beautiful, and she was young. Agatha Betrix had been both *once*.

It was enough. But as yet she had not felt that last straw laid across her back which will make of a very ordinary woman a very devil. She was only silently jealous, and inwardly hating, and polite with an overwhelming politeness.

That was before the Countess of E—— invited Irion to dinner, and did *not* invite Agatha Betrix.

[N.B. —The Countess knew that Irion was one of the Floyds of Rockford.]

But Irion was not proud. She liked the dinner—only because it filled so many hours of her life that memory could not dwell there. She liked her money—only because it bought her forgetfulness, and because she could amuse herself by indulging her natural love of giving.



It was delightful to supply Eleanor without limit for her schools and her churches; delightful to see this sister 'waking up' out of the old Rockford sleepiness. Actively happy now, because she *could* do all the good she *would*, receiving the praises of God and men. For even Eleanor liked to be appreciated—and there is no lack of appreciation in the Church—appreciation of the gift and the giver.

And Irion had her own 'fun' with her money in the background—innocent 'fun,' of which no one knew; fun with little street ragamuffins who had never tasted tarts, and cakes, nor any of the good things they saw in the confectioner's window, pressing their noses hungrily against the glass. These, when Irion saw them, she would take inside the shop, and, to the disgust of 'young ladies' and waiters, fill the empty stomachs with tarts or poultry, or what they would; the dirty pockets with 'stores' for 'mammy and the rest,' and the little cloud-covered lives with brightness.

And Irion delighted to see the astonished

face of a crippled crossing-sweeper, when now and again, coming out of a luncheon-house, she would bring with her food and a bottle of beer, and slip it into the mud-covered, trembling hand held out to her for a penny.

‘Who would not be rich?’ she cried, and thanked God, who had made up to her in this way for the evils of her life.

Utter foolishness all this, of course, but the very nature of Irion.

Nevertheless, she knew that in so long or so short a time she would be forced to seek for something beyond, wherewith to fill her life; something substantial, which would sit in the place of her poor dead love. She could never be content to walk on idly without a goal, and racing as she was racing now would tire her soon.

How then should she shape her life?

For Irion it was not reward enough that her poorer brothers and sisters should crowd around her and envy her, and strive to imitate her in all things unworthy of imitation. Such triumphs were not worth a struggle to reach.

Therefore Irion asked herself now, as in the days of her girlhood, 'Where is woman's mission and how, if she be not wife and mother? What could she do in her life, that, dying, there should be something left behind to tell of her existence? Should she write books?—what kind?—Novels?—with what object? To help poison at their roots the morals of a young generation? A way of getting fame with little trouble this—amusing, doubtless, but scarcely profitable in the sum of a life's well-doing. But suppose she were to put herself through the ordeal of fire by plunging into the very midst of well-dressed unreality, and learning for herself the unprofitableness of it all, the utter emptiness, the mockery? If she, a ringleader, should turn traitor, and expose it with pen and ink and sisterly kindness withal—might not some good arise to pay her for her work? Irion could not answer herself yet. She must look around for a time, and silently plumb the depths of this society. She must be sure in what places the rocks and reefs rose on which the proud-sailing ships got wrecked

at last. And this was not the work of minutes.

For the present, too, Irion had found occupation enough. In supplying Eleanor, she supplied herself. Now, for the first time, there was sympathy between these two—oneness in a plan which both were striving to accomplish. Their motives were different, their deeds the same. Eleanor would work for the glory of her Church and her God; Irion would work for very love of the helpless children which God has given to men, and men have forsaken.

And this was their work.

They would open and set working a new Foundling, with a new object and a new morality as its basis. It was not respectable sin which Irion and Eleanor would cover up by taking to themselves children who could bring 'a character' with them and 'a recommendation,' and half-a-dozen 'certificates'! No; Irion would go into the highways and the hedges, and pick up the lost lambs wherever they lay starving, and bring them home, and make them happy. She would teach them by

demonstration that ugliness and darkness and sin are not all the life God fashions or reveals. She would set them face to face with gentle nature, and let them learn from her that heaven is not a myth, nor earth a hell.

A bold scheme this, and a costly ; but what matter ? Irion was reckless of her gold for pleasure's sake ; and Eleanor—Eleanor was a servant worthy of her hire, a servant to whom toil was sweetness, for the work's sake which had been given her to do.

And so, widely apart as their lives lay, these two were yet nearer than they had ever been in the days of their old Rockford simplicity. And Eleanor, at least, was in a New Jerusalem of happiness.

And so time moved on, but slowly, for all Irion's pushing. The days and the nights were three times as long as they used to be when she was 'young.' How sad it is to talk of when we were young ! The echo answers us from so far off ! and further and further if ourselves, not the years, have made us old. Sometimes there is no echo. We have never been young !



Only three months had gone by since Ulric Aylmer left Irion—only three months—and she grew wearier day by day. Sometimes she thought the weariness was physical, that her health was failing her under the glare of gas and the midnight wakefulness. She did not care. She did not mind dying, if only she might die quickly. But what she feared was decline, slow, imperceptible decline, lagging fearfully at the end. Her spirits were failing, her young spirits which used never to be tired! and the colour had gone from her face, and she was always so weary of limb.

But no one noticed it, and she struggled on. Next week Naomi Hurst was coming to stay with her. She liked Naomi better than the rest of her friends. Perhaps Naomi would 'wake her up,' as Gilbert used to do; but Gilbert tired her now. Perhaps Naomi would go into the country with her for a time, or to the sea-side, and perhaps, with Naomi by her side and no one else, she should be able to fancy herself Irion Floyd again; cynical Naomi to wash the gilding off all morbid sentiment with the cold water of fact. 'Sufficient unto the



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day is the evil thereof,' Naomi always said to Irion. It used to have no effect, this philosophy of idleness; none, when life lay all before her.

It might be different now.



like that? so soon after their marriage, too! They told us distinctly—both of them—that she was going back with him. The change was quite sudden.'

'I suppose you know all about it, from your innuendoes. I don't—don't want to either. Women *love* a mystery.'

'I fancy I know—yes. But whether for yourself you care to know or not, I wish you to attend to what I am saying for others' sake. For Naomi's sake. For the sake of the family generally. Of course I cannot make my suspicions of Mrs. Lewis—be they true or false—public property, but *distinctly, I do not approve of Naomi going to stay at her house.* An afternoon call is quite another thing.'

'Stop it then, of course.' All this between the pages of a Blackstone which he was searching. 'You know best.'

'I! how can I stop it? You can, with half a word.'

'Women again! Want to have things done your way, and somebody else to take the responsibility! However, I will do you

the justice to allow that you have generally some reason in what you say,' condescendingly. 'So you really think Naomi ought not to go there?'

'*Not to stay!*—as I said, a mere calling acquaintance is quite another thing.'

Mrs. Betrix was thinking of the fancy dress ball next month to which Mrs. Lewis had invited her, and for which she had a startling costume ready—a thing she had only worn once, and then it had been 'the thing' of the evening! She was looking forward to this second opportunity of showing the public her artistic skill. But of course Naomi's interests were first.

'Why don't you tell the Mater?' Ormond Hurst asked, shutting his book, 'or the governor. Governor has more authority over Naomi, perhaps.'

'And neither any. Besides, they will think I am prejudiced. They know I never could endure the woman, and like all old people, they are as obstinate, as ignorant, or blind, whichever you like to call it. But a word from you is enough. You must know that.'

He did know it. It was his pride that he, not they, ruled the household. But then he deserved the honour; he had never disgraced them or himself.

'I'll think about it, Agatha,' gravely; then, after a pause: 'What's the special cause of complaint against Mrs. Irion?'

'I don't say it's her fault, remember. Indeed, I'm pretty firmly persuaded it's Gilbert's; he never had any sense of decency, and Australia has made him worse. I always said it would.'

She did. Mrs. Betrix was decidedly a clever woman.

'Gilbert!' in unconcealed surprise—then calming, 'oh! that's it, is it?'

Ormond Hurst pulled his moustache and fidgeted with the paper-knife, tapping it upon his knee, and whistling a low accompaniment from Mozart as an interlude. Presently he extricated himself from his arm-chair, the cigar being finished, and stretching himself, remarked:

'Right, as usual, Agatha. *Naomi shan't go.*'

'But don't say I suggested it, please. I

don't want to make myself disagreeable to Naomi. We are very good friends. But, of course, it is my duty to keep her out of dangerous places. Poor mother is so unsuspicious !' contemptuously.

'Did I not say you are quite right, Agatha,' magnificently. 'I'll go and write to the governor at once.'

'Let me see what you say ?'

'Certainly ; come into the library.'

And together they left the room—together they composed a letter which Ormond penned. It was a very sensible letter, and a very moderate letter ; but, for all that, an absolute edict from the ruler of the family. Naomi was not to be allowed to visit Mrs. Lewis.

Naomi was at Hillfields deluding her youthful cousin again with hopes which might or might not ever be fruitful, as chance or herself should will it. One would be disposed to pity him, only that he seemed quite happy in his delusion, especially just now. He was proprietor of a newspaper—proprietor of *Satire*—and a man at last, only Naomi would still persist in calling him a boy, and treating him



as one. She would call his paper 'his new toy,' and Gilbert 'his nurse,' whose duty was to prevent his spoiling it if possible. And Naomi said: 'No toy, or anything else, lasts long in Vere's hands. He has a way of "smashing up" things, and calling upon his money to supply their place. Lucky for him that the money is there, independent of himself and his many talents.' And because of this money Vere Penrose was—what he was.

At this moment Naomi, sitting side by side with him under a palm in one of the large conservatories at Hillfields, was saying:

'Why, Vere, if I were to marry you to-morrow (as you would have me in your infantine impatience), you'd kiss me on Tuesday, contradict me on Wednesday, swear at me on Thursday, and before Saturday be found somewhere about the Antipodes, with brandy and cigars as comforters. I know you.'

'You judge of my future by my present; that is hard, Naomi; men change, you know. It is in your power to change me; yours to



Naomi,' as she half turned her back upon him. 'Naomi, do forgive me this once. I won't offend again, honour bright, Nan!' looking unutterable things at her back hair.

'Carry my jacket for me,' was her answer, tossing a huge fur-cloak over his shoulder. 'It's too hot here. Come and try that winning hazard again. You may be capable of accomplishing that much in your life.'

'Billiards! Is life a billiard-table, think you, Naomi?'

'Some people *have* a way of taking shots all over the place, you know, and trusting to win by a fluke.'

'And some people recklessly poke one in the eyes with their cue. It's not pleasant, that, Naomi.'

'For goodness' sake! don't try to be satirical, Vere. You can't do it. Little men never can. Come along.'

And they left the conservatory. But it was noticeable that Vere Penrose walked almost on the tips of his toes after that last remark from Naomi. His eyes, too, had a perpetual tendency to be measuring the distance be-



Common sense he possessed, and common knowledge, all that was required of him in his trade of exporting and importing. The superficialities of life he gave as a portion to his children. No money was spared to buy for them what he had not—refinement.

'Go up to the billiard-room, Vere,' Naomi said; 'I will join you there. Don't make a shoe-mat of my cloak, though' (he lifted his foot as if an asp had stung him), 'and when you get in, give it to Clementine.'

Then she followed her parents into the conservatory, and he went on his way, happy that it was allowed him even to carry her cloak.

The old people filled the seat under the palm to overflowing, so Naomi took her place on the edge of a marble-basined fountain, and waited. She felt very good-tempered, and very patient, and very well-disposed towards the nervous-looking old couple. If they were 'going to twaddle a bit,' she would be gracious and give them a hearing. Generally, Miss Hurst had to play the part of patient listener: Miss Hurst, of middle age, and much learning, but otherwise nobody.

‘Now then, Naomi! What’s all this about Irion?’ her father began, with man-like directness. Mrs. Hurst, after the manner of women *explained!*

‘Your father means to say, my dear, that he has just got a letter from Ormond, who says that—that Agatha says——’

‘No, not Agatha, my dear, *people!*’

‘But Agatha did say it, Tom, for all that; I’ve heard her myself, before now.’

‘Stick to your point, Jeannie, stick to your point.’

‘Well, Naomi, people—if that pleases Tom—people say it is not all quite as it should be with your friend, Mrs. Lewis. I mean that—er—that—er—there was something curious about her husband leaving her as he did, and—I don’t know anything about it myself, Naomi, but Ormond does evidently, and one can always trust to his judgment in social matters.’

‘Or to Agatha’s, which?’ Naomi interrupted aside, letting the water of the fountain drip off the tips of her fingers.

‘Agatha’s had nothing to do with it, my



dear!' answered Mr. Hurst. 'The letter is from Ormond! He objects to your paying this visit to the 'ouse!—staying there, you know. You are not obliged to drop her altogether, because, as Ormond says, nothing is actually proved against her; but friendship is quite another thing—so it is, of course. If you stay under her roof, you throw yourself open to a partnership in her doings, as Ormond says; and prudence is the better 'alf of valour you know, my dear! always was!' A pause, then, as Naomi made no answer:

'You must put her off, as Ormond says.'

'I hadn't asked her,' Naomi sneered.

'Come, now, you know what I mean!' chuckling good-naturedly.

'Your father means, Naomi,' *explained* Mrs. Hurst again, 'that things being—er—being—er—as they are, it would not be quite the thing—exactly wise, you know, to—but, my dear, we are sure your own good sense will tell you better than anything we can say; only, for the present, we must ask you—er—'

'Forbid you,' corrected Mr. Hurst, severely.

‘Yes, forbid your being too much mixed up with her. I’ve no doubt,’ seeing an angry expression on Naomi’s face, ‘no doubt there is nothing *really* wrong, but she certainly is very showy, and very fast, and very extravagant—and getting quite a name in London—and you know people are bound to look after themselves.’

‘And others,’ aside from Naomi.

‘And we cannot afford——’

‘Not us especially, Jeannie—*no one* can afford,’ Mr. Hurst interrupted, ‘to have his name mixed up with shady people, as Ormond says; so, my dear! the long and short of it is, you must refuse her invitation to go there on this visit!’

‘But I have accepted it.’

‘Unaccept it then,’ jocosely.

‘Make some excuse,’ suggested Mrs. Hurst wisely, as if she had discovered quite a new way out of the difficulty.

‘On the contrary, *I shall go*,’ Naomi answered doggedly. She was not afraid of her parents. Moreover, she knew the source of the prohibition.

‘But, my dear—*consider*,’ said her mother impressively.

‘The thing is done, mother, and it won’t be undone.’

‘No such a word as won’t, if you please, my dear.’

Mr. Hurst was trying to ‘get up steam,’ as Gilbert always called it, and, as usual, steam would not be forced. There was nothing of the *Thunderer* in Thomas Hurst. Possibly he rather respected his daughter for having a will of her own—only Ormond had spoken, and no one ever disputed Ormond—except Naomi. Poor Mr. Hurst was beginning to think that Ormond might just as well give his own orders in future, if he wanted them obeyed. He made one more effort.

‘Besides, my dear, if Agatha and Ormond, who are so much older and so much more thoughtful than you——’

‘They might *think* a little less with advantage.’

‘My dear, you are in a bad temper this morning!—quite unlike you, quite! Ormond only speaks for your good. If, now, Agatha

had written instead, I might not have taken so much notice. Agatha is always imagining. But Ormond is a man of sense! we may always rely on his judgment. I am sure you've never found it err—'ave you now?

'I never found it at all. Ormond's judgment is like the echo—inspiring, but not original.'

'Anyhow, my dear, it was very kind of him to take the trouble to warn you—busy as he is just now,' said Mrs. Hurst, indulging in gentle, motherly fiction. 'Do be guided *by us* then, for once in your life. You will thank us for it some day.'

'I would rather do the thanking business at once. Give my best and politest to my learned brother, for his kind invitation to help him pick up the crumbs which Agatha generously tosses us, but say I prefer to dine off my own table—cleanly. If it's all the same to him and her.'

Naomi spoke without anger, in her usual monotonous drawl, leaning her head against a tall flower-vase, and gazing vacantly up into the creepers. Mr. Hurst laughed, clapping

his hands upon his knee. Mrs. Hurst looked grave and reproachful; and they were both silent.

Then Naomi dragged herself up to go back to Vere, both speakers seeming to be quite exhausted. She stood at the door, dreaming, holding it open in her hand, as if it was still doubtful whether she intended going in or out, or remaining fixed for ever.

Mrs. Hurst knitted herself up for yet another effort of parental authority.

'Remember, Naomi,' she said severely, 'you are *not* to go to Irion's, whatever your own ideas on the subject may be.'

Naomi looked up, but answered never a word, and was gone.

'What's the use of arguing?' she told herself, as usual. 'I don't want to make a fuss. Arguing puts people out of temper. Arguing is at the bottom of half the evils of life. It isn't the being sat upon that people mind, it's hearing it talked about.'

And she went straightway to give the maid orders for packing her box.

It was to-morrow Irion expected her.



## CHAPTER XII.

AND so, on the day and hour appointed, Naomi arrived at Irion's house. She had not asked leave of Agatha Betrix, and she had ignored her parents' forbidding. There had been no noisy defiance of orders, no arguing and threatening; only a silent, a persistent resistance of all authority. And Naomi knew that she had given up something of her personal comfort in thus setting at naught her elder brother and sister for Irion's sake. Now personal comfort was of much account in the sum of Naomi's life's contentment. But Irion was a friend—her friend especially; and Naomi was loyal, if slow. For a long time she had sat idle, listening to Mrs. Betrix's hints against Irion. It was too much trouble to answer her—besides, answer-



ing would have been of no avail. Words are poor things always—actions alone have any strength in them. And now that the time was come, Naomi acted as it seemed best to her for Irion's defence.

'The world,' she argued, 'will soon begin fitting together the pieces of Agatha's puzzle, which she so carelessly lets fall all over the place, and they will doubt of Irion's honesty. The world enjoys a game of "follow my leader." But then one leader is as good as another. It elects by bribery, and the highest bidder wins. For all that, the world likes to appear honest; honesty is becoming, therefore it has a good reason for its election—the reason—its own approval. Everyone visits her! Everyone knows her! We are everyone. You and I and all of us who take our drive in the Row and our seat in the Opera House. We are one man, and his shadow: a substance and a reflection. We do well to support ourselves. Only we oftener delude ourselves,' Naomi said. 'For instance, the world will not know but that I am visiting Irion with family consent. They cannot say anything very bitter

when the daughter of a highly respected—self-made men are always highly respected—millionaire, known either personally or by name to all substantial London, is allowed to visit at the house. And Agatha dare not say I am not allowed; it would be exposing her own weakness. Agatha likes to be credited with supreme authority. Agatha will not drown herself.'

Nevertheless, Naomi knew that Agatha would resent, in private, this quiet shelving of her authority. In private, too, Naomi would fight her. Not noisily, not openly, not so as to excite herself or her neighbours; but silently, with that persistent pushing which will overthrow mountains, where gunpowder fails to move them.

But although Naomi was going to carry Irion's colours, if a battle royal came about, she made no demonstration. Perhaps, after all, she would not be called upon to do anything, and she much preferred sitting still—fighting was such hard work!

Therefore, when she arrived at Irion's house, she was the Naomi of old, careful only to spare herself all unnecessary fatigue.

Irion shook hands with her as a stranger would, knowing she hated 'kissing and gush;' and Naomi only said, turning her shoulders to the maid the while, that she might take off the heavy fur cloak :

'I don't consider that you are looking over well, Irion. Gaiety doesn't suit you. You haven't learnt to take things quietly yet.' Then, to the maid, '*Déballez moi un mouchoir propre, s'il vous plait, Clarisse.*'

And Clarisse thought she had come upon a 'real lady' this time—one who could not fetch her own handkerchief! One who would require much attention! One who would pay handsomely for it, of course. Clarisse was overwhelmingly polite. Her mistress was liberal enough, *oh, certainement!* and kind enough, *cela va sans dire*; but she was much too independent to reach Clarisse's standard of *Grande Dame-ism*. Mademoiselle was *parfaite!*

'I am not quite the thing,' Irion answered Naomi, when the servant was gone; 'over-fatigue, as you say; but I shall soon get used to your London life.'

And she turned away, that Naomi should not make any further remark upon her changed looks. For yet a little while she would deceive even Naomi; but for herself—she knew the truth now. It had come upon her quite suddenly. And she was frightened before the face of it, looking at it from the far distance.

‘The last of the Aylmers,’ people said, when they spoke of Ulric and his crime. But no. In all human probability he would not be the last of the Aylmers. A new generation would arise, with Irion as its mother.

Irion was not glad. It was only an extra burden laid upon her, making her life more difficult still. But it was a long way off, the scaring face of this future, and for the present she only tried to shut her eyes to its reality. Perhaps it would fade away harmlessly; perhaps the people would be right, and the race of Aylmer would cease with him who had disgraced its good old name. The name a score of generations had borne so proudly, holding its honour so dear amongst them! And now—the very dwelling-house was fall-

ing to ruin with the rest, and the name of Aylmer carried with it no personality. The village was there, and the estate, but they did not suggest a family now. There was no meaning in the name they bore.

So long as silence were possible, Irion intended to keep her secret, hoping, as her dearest hope, that it might never be known. But if it were, then must her whole life be altered; then could nothing be as she had willed it; then—but she would not think. ‘Not yet,’ she said; ‘it is not yet.’ And she whirled away in the laughter-loving crowd. There was music here, and the glare of light; the voice of men’s adoration, and women’s envy. There was intoxication and forgetfulness for yet a little while.

‘And what may be the programme for the evening?’ Naomi asked later, over afternoon tea. It was not an at-home day; and Eleanor was out ‘shepherdessing’ as usual.

‘What would you like?’ Irion answered her. ‘There’s a new play coming out at the Empress. Will you go and see it? All the world and his wife will be there.’

‘My dear, so long as the world has a tongue, it will wag. You would stop it if you could, of course—you can’t—you wisely give up trying, and stop your own ears instead. Now, no doubt it is very pleasant to *be* a sinner; all the same one doesn’t care to be credited with that virtue or any other one doesn’t possess. Society is over-generous with its gifts—they cost nothing, you see. If now society takes to presenting you with Gilbert, you won’t find it so easy to refuse the gift. Don’t let them have the chance of offering it. How say you?’



'That's satisfactory. It's not so bad, coming to stay with you, after all. You're improving, Irion.' A pause; then: 'But one thing——'

'But what?'

'Are you quite wise to have Gilbert about with you everywhere?'

'Why not? He's a very harmless person, isn't he? Or is it I who am supposed to be a stumbling-block for him? I thought you didn't believe in the weakness of men, Naomi.'

'Nor do I. Gilbert can take care of himself—trust him. He won't be so careful of you though.'

'I don't mind being responsible for my own character—just for once.'

'Well, look here,' talking to the footstool, or her feet, which were idly kicking it, 'you can't accuse me of prudery—can you?'

'Not exactly.'

'Nevertheless, were I in your place, I would admire that young gentleman from a safe distance.'

'But why? What has he done?'

you say. Suppose I will think over your sermon, Mr. Preacher.'

'Don't trouble on my account.'

'It never struck me before. Possibly Gilbert was wiser in his generation than I. It is with the greatest difficulty that I have persuaded him to go anywhere with me of late. I wondered what was up with him.'

'Something more amusing on hand, depend upon it.' Then, after a pause, 'I never can see what women find to admire in Gilbert; but they do.'

'He's very amusing, as I said before.'

'Amusing, is he!—well, I like to be amused; but if Gilbert were not my brother, I should call his fun vulgarity. Not that I dare do it; we Hursts can't afford to be hypercritical, you see; someone else might say we could all wear the same cap.' Naomi stopped to gape, and then went on sleepily: 'There's one thing I do envy you, Irion.'

'What may that be?'

'Your ancestry.'

'And who cares about ancestry in these days? Money is everything. It's much more

satisfactory to end nobly than to begin nobly. Marry a title, Naomi; that's the thing to do in these days.'

'Why didn't you, then?'

'I! I was penniless, and I married *money*. You can do ditto for a *family*.'

Irion was speaking very bitterly, quite unlike herself, and Naomi was sure now that all had not gone well with her life. Things had fallen awry somehow; but until she saw exactly how, Naomi was not going to show that she had noticed their awryness. 'One should always shut one's eyes to flaws in one's diamonds, if one can't exchange them for better,' she told herself. And she went upstairs to dress for the evening.

Naomi was going to look her best to-night. Lord Hardey would be there, and Lord Hardey admired her vastly. Vere would be there, and Vere was despairingly jealous. Vere always made a fool of himself from hopelessness; Lord Hardey made a fool of himself from conceit. And Naomi laughed at both, encouraged both. And was lazily triumphant.

'If men like to make donkeys of them-

selves,' she said to Irion, 'is there any reason why we should not drive them four-in-hand with bells, that the passers-by may look up and see how well we handle them.'

And it was Ulric Aylmer's play that they were going to see—the play to which Irion had looked as a stepping-stone to his greatness. She did not care now. She was only going to see it because 'every one' went to see everything at the Empress. She did not tell Naomi who was the author, and indeed Naomi would have been in nowise interested had she done so. Besides, it was better kept a secret, if the story of the play should be what Irion had always fancied it would. The old vulgar story, so prettily got up in tinsel and lime-light, that in the end a murderer should be mistaken for a hero.

Ulric Aylmer had never told her the story of this play, saying always, 'Wait till it comes out, dear one; it won't bear telling.'

How anxiously she had looked forward to its appearance then! How painfully she had longed for its success!

Now, how utterly indifferent she was! Let

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its triumph be never so grand, or its fall never so great—it was nothing to her now.

It had passed out of her life with him who wrote it.

## CHAPTER XIV.

BUT it was not the story of the Aylmer murder which Irion saw put upon the stage that night at the Empress. Somehow, of late, she had made sure that it would be. She, in her hardness of heart, had fancied that Ulric Aylmer would make a hero of himself and heroism of crime, offering the world a defence of what was indefensible. She thought he would cleverly wrap the deed about in a halo of tragic romance, which should blind a sentiment-drunken audience to the ugliness of blood and death, and gross human passion.

But Ulric Aylmer had not stooped so low.

It was a tale of a ruined life ; yes, a story of good turned to evil by rough handling, and a lack of human sympathy. A tale of young love thrown back upon itself, of a young



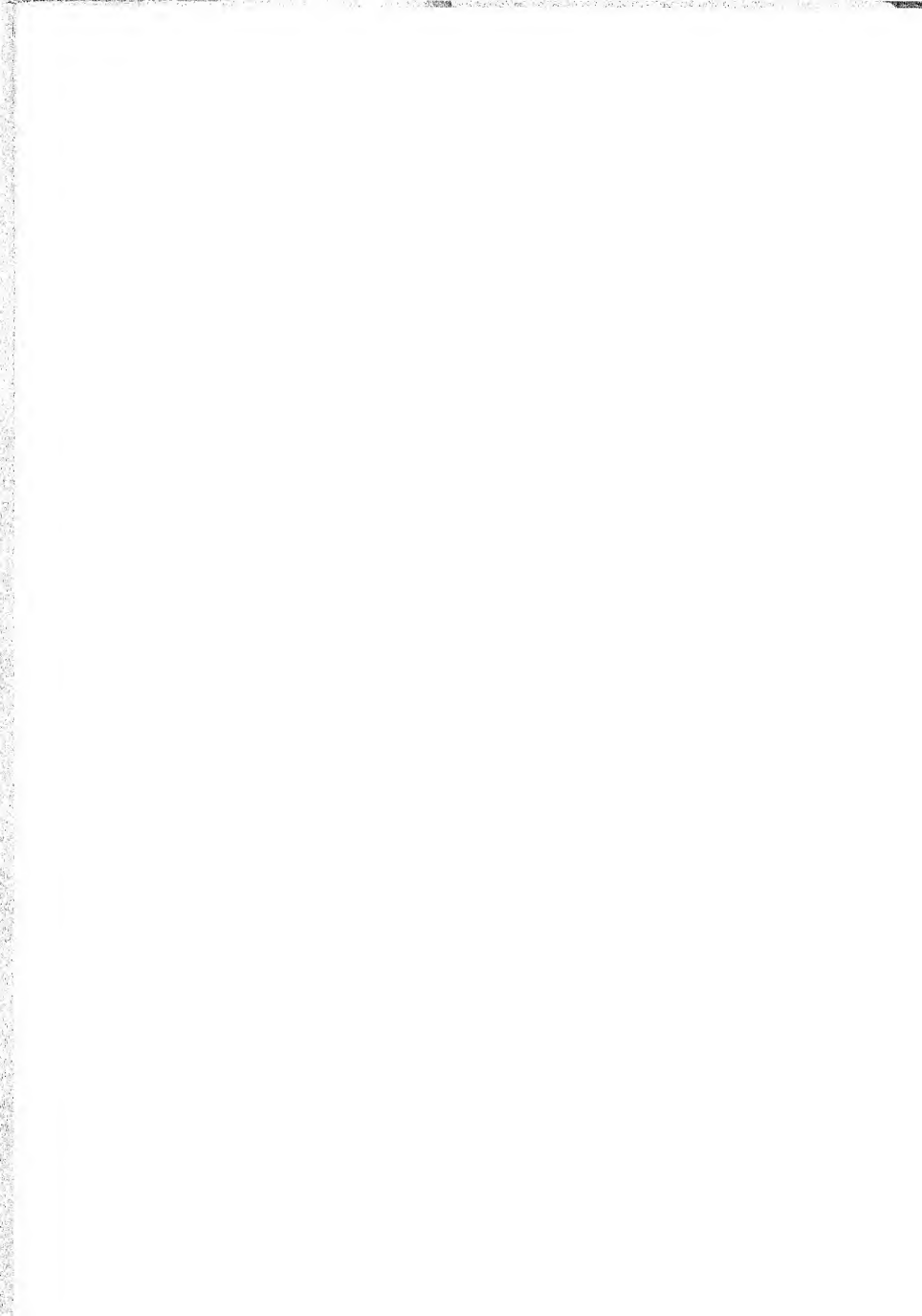
life ruined in a moment of unbridled anger. But the story on the stage was a poem without the leaven of vulgar passion, which, to Irion's thinking, leavened the whole of Ulric Aylmer's deed.

And he could invent so nobly ! He could make so grand a hero, being himself so poor a sinner ! He could draw a picture of honour, and delicacy, and manly greatness, such as few or none have drawn before ! He could compel his audience to sympathy, he who had found none for himself !

It was a wonderful play. The world said so, and for once there was no prejudice in the judgment, its author being unknown to them. They called him a great genius, and called loudly through the voice of their criticisms for the showing of his name and place amongst them.

But only Irion knew, and Irion would not answer. If he were known, she argued, then were his life known with him. Alas ! he had done well in throwing up his own identity.

And yet the world would not have judged him as she judged, or condemned with her



which Irion had spoken to Naomi. And Irion danced all night, and forgot absolutely that the shadow of Ulric Aylmer had ever fallen upon her life. Her partners talked to her of the play, raving as people always rave over a new sensation ; like mocking-birds over a fig-tree, with much noise, if little meaning, in their cry. They were astonished at Mrs. Lewis's indifference. She was generally so warm in her praises or her condemnations, so good a leader for the chattering choir. They had learnt to rely upon her of late for the key-note. They could not understand her apathy. Neither would she have them understand her in this. Let it be enough for them to know her young and beautiful ; enough for her that they had made her a *name*. A name for her riches, and for her lavish tossing of them down the throats of a gaping crowd ; a name for the artistic eccentricity of her dress ; a *name* for the delicacy of her dinners, and for the brilliancy of her balls !

And as yet, the name was a clean one.

If people wondered and speculated—as who should prevent ?—they had not dared to ques-

‘Then why do you *do* the things? That’s what puzzles me.’

‘My dear, if one has been created a puppet, and if some one else pulls the string, puppet must dance, do you see, or people wouldn’t look at it.’

‘Is it *necessary* to be looked at?’

‘What?—when you are up for sale!’

Irion laughed aloud. Naomi did not laugh. Naomi never laughed.

‘You sold!’ Irion exclaimed. ‘When *you* are sold, I’ll believe in bargains!’

‘Yes;’ placidly, ‘we know how to run ourselves up, don’t we?’

‘You do. People are under the delusion that you are a most unapproachable young woman. What a delusion you are! not a bit what you pretend to be.’

‘Find me the woman who is.’

‘Some are *honest*er than others, though.’

‘A mistake, I assure you. The effect of their clothes, that’s all.’

Then silence fell upon them, for Naomi went to sleep. She hated talking—and ‘Irion is so excitable,’ she said to herself.

It's my duty to subdue her. All put on, every bit of it. She'll be crying half the night, and a crying woman is one shade more objectionable than a laughing one. Why can't people be quiet?"

And so, early in the morning light, these two reached home together.

It was only one amongst a score of days and nights which Irion was hunting out of her life; for since the new knowledge had come upon her, she was more than ever straining after forgetfulness. If she thought for a moment, it were to pile agony upon agony. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," she said, trying to embrace the philosophy of her day. Trying, but failing, failing always, now, in the lonely hours of so-called rest.

## CHAPTER XV.

THE next night was the night of Irion's fancy dress ball. Half London knew of it by report. It was to be something unsurpassed, people said, a thing to stand alone in the chronicles of that season. And people said that Mrs. Lewis's dress was to cost several thousand pounds—they would have given you the odd shillings, pence, and farthings on pressure. It was to be something quite new, and original, and startling. A thousand speculations as to its form and making were flying from lip to lip. It was all talked about, and written about, and prophesied about; so that Irion, after the manner of Lord Byron, found herself a public character in a night.

They expected much of her—'Well, they should not be disappointed,' she said, and



hand and brain worked to the accomplishment of one end—society's approval.

Moreover, it would be the end of her new life—and she had thought it must last so long! It was ended already. She must turn her face from society, now when society would crown her; whose crown she must throw back at its feet, fate having willed that she should never wear it. There was something different, something beyond and above to reach at now.

Therefore this ball was to be a sort of funeral pyre, which Irion would set ablaze over the corpse of her old self; a last gathering together of the old feverish energy which had enabled her to live through the past three months. It was May now, the season must be opened, and this should be Irion's opening, which London would remember—till its end. 'A season.' How vast a time to be remembered! how worthy of the struggle for notice! In sooth, we are blessed, who can see fools at our feet—in the place where we shall sit to-morrow!

And this ball was to be in fancy dress.

Irion would give play to her skill and to her imagination, showing people what might be accomplished of effect and poetry even in London—money being of no account.

The rooms and the passages in Irion's house were large, and she had turned each one into a picture; different in kind, suggesting different ideas, arousing different sentiments. The entrance was a wood-path in spring. Trees meeting overhead, turf under foot, mossy banks on either side, thick spread with wild spring flowers. Primroses and violets grew there, and young ferns and grasses, with a stream of water wandering clear and shallow amongst them; dripping here, and splashing there, and suggesting a world of country freshness. Overhead, looking up through the trees, there was a spangled starlit sky, and the rising moon beyond. The delusion was perfect.

Turning out of the cool wood-path, you could wander into new and different scenes. An Italian garden here, with flower-beds and statues and fountains. A creeper-covered arbour there, with the moonlight struggling

through it. And the creepers were real, breathing their sweetness over all. In another place there was an ice grotto, blue and cold and sparkling as the caves in glaciers. And again, a Moorish palace, where, seated on the ground or on low satin-covered stools, cool drinks and perfumes were handed by Moorish men and maids.

Art and nature had been made to work together, but so cunningly you could scarce tell where art ended and nature began, or where nature merged itself into art. There had been no clashing nor blurring, neither parodying of poetry nor burlesquing of sentiment. As the dresses would vary in kind, so the scenes were different, but each perfect in itself. They were a series of pictures into which the guests must breathe the breath of life.

Music there was everywhere, floating about, but unseen, and a song which might have been the song of a nightingale somewhere on the branches.

There was a place for dancing too, but that was away from the rest. Behind the

house was a walled square garden. Over this a tent had been spread, and here, who would, might dance to the crash of foot-moving music.

And about the dresses of the guests Irion had made strict rules. There was to be no playing at costumes. No used-up ball dresses, with tinsel stars mocking Morning, and taking its name in vain! No last year's cotton petticoats, transformed into shepherdesses by the aid of a flattened-out straw hat and a clothes-hook! Irion had distinctly stated her prohibitions in the invitations, so that people to ignore them must ignore her. And the children of this generation are at least wise.

But Irion's dress was none of those which had been given her by her friends in their spirit of modern prophecy.

She was Semiramis, Queen of Nineveh, and Eleanor was her bondswoman. The dresses were perfect. From the smallest detail to the greatest there was no flaw or lack, no sham or delusion. The jewels were real, and the stuffs were real, and Irion wore them right royally.

Nevertheless, this dress was the straw which broke the camel's back. A word, and all is told—Agatha Betrix came also as Semiramis!

At least, she called herself Semiramis, and the costumier called her Semiramis, and she had spent untold gold in being Semiramis. And after it all she was not worthy to unloose the latchet of Irion's shoes! A very actor at a penny fair to a Bernhardt or a Kendal!

Mrs. Betrix, after the manner of her kind, had gone to the 'first' London costumier, and had said to him, 'Give me the dress of Semiramis, without regard to cost.'

Irion, after a manner of her own, had taken a journey to Paris, and there she had studied long and earnestly the celebrated picture of Semiramis dying in Nineveh after her pride had fallen so low—when in Bactria and Ethiopia the conqueror stood conquered. And Irion had traversed the length and breadth of London, hunting among the old curiosity-shops for jewels and decorations which would bear being shapen after her



fashion. Irion had made drawings of every ornament, of every fold in her cloth. She had chosen every material, and given every detail. The result—perfection.

Alas for Agatha Betrix! She was worse than put in the shade—she was extinguished altogether. The moon in the sunlight! a feeble suggestion of what might be, if you imagined long enough!

If Agatha Betrix had been fain to deal gently with Irion before that evening, she was no longer so after it. Jealousy is the weapon which makes a woman strike hot, and sharp, and pitilessly. Let the green-eyed monster clutch her, and she never stops to think again. She only dashes about furiously, cutting down whatever comes within her reach. And when it is all over, when the desolation is complete, she stops—for lack of strength. Then, looking around, she is surprised to find herself sitting alone upon the field. She is frightened at her desolation. She falls to weeping. But she cannot undo.

There was no mercy for Irion now. Could



she expect it, when her dress had trampled another under foot?

‘Do you think I should have a chance of a dance with Mrs. Lewis to-night, if I asked her?’ said a partner of Mrs. Betrix, knowing her intimate with the hostess.

‘What! when my brother Gilbert is present? Do you for a moment delude yourself with the hope?’

And Mrs. Betrix laughed, a laugh which would imply a joke. But behind it, subdued, yet distinct, a ring of the voice told that truth was the source of the remark. There is more in implication than speech—and it is so much safer.

Mrs. Betrix’s partner could not even answer; he changed the subject quickly—as Mrs. Betrix knew he must.

And that was the overture.

Nevertheless, the ball ended as it had begun—a thing alone—and a triumph. No one knew it was the last, the very last fiery glow of a sun with the hill-tops covering it, and the night waiting behind.

Mrs. Lewis was more beautiful than they

had known her, and they all talked about her—prophesying what she would do amongst them this spring, whether kings or princes would notice her, and what should be her destiny.

Happily it was none of their making.

## CHAPTER XVI.

A FEW more weeks of excitement followed for Irion ; weeks chased with hue and cry out of her life, which would fain have gone on galloping thus to the end. Only fate came to the rescue. Fate set up a fence which she could never leap—never. She could only turn round now, and trot gently back to the old starting-point, bearing her defeat in silence. If that were all!—silence. But silence brought thought, and thought brought pain, and it must all be borne now, and more, for the end was not yet.

But it came. In the July dulness a son was born to the house of Aylmer. An heir to the old name and the old estates ; an inheritor of the Aylmer wealth, and of the Aylmer power.

Irion's son !

And from that moment Irion had no more doubting of her destiny.

Not for herself must she live now, but for him—the new Aylmer of Aylmer. Live that the old house should rise up again in all its proud old glory. Live, that the old name might be clean again in its new youthfulness. Live for her boy.

From to-day every thought of self—every prejudice—every self-made belief, must be set aside, that one great purpose should in the end be accomplished. Her boy must come by his own again. The world's honour, and the goodwill of men, which were his birth-right—which his father had squandered, robbing the high estate of all its greatness.

She would win it back—she—Irion—with the strength and the devotion of her life.

And this was the task which was laid upon her !

No simple one, or easy of accomplishment—only possible. Herself and others to conquer ! The prejudices of a score of years to cast aside

out of the way ! And what she set herself to do for her child's sake, must be thoroughly done. No more finching or failing, or turning aside at spectres for her. Her new part must be acted from beginning to end without hesitation and without flaw. She must *be* what she would have others believe her—a wife as well as a mother. There must be nothing for the world to discover afterwards, and to show her boy triumphing in failure. Nothing that the boy himself should learn to call deception. Henceforth her life must be—what ? ‘A fool's paradise,’ she said ; but a paradise, for all that, to every outward seeming. As to the inward knowledge, only herself might have it. Only herself might know that a substance was but a shadow after all, that facts were fancies, and that truth *was not*.

But her boy should hold up his head proudly yet, amongst his own people, and on his own soil. He should stand as the Aylmers of old stood, by the consent of high and low. There should be no question of a father's crime to cast its shadow over him. Men must be made to honour the father first, and



through him the son. And hers was the part to lead them. Lead Rockford and Aylmer back to their old subservience, that they should lick the dust at the feet of him they had once spurned.

Even as she must lick the dust—for her boy's sake.

Often she shuddered at what lay before her ; but she did not turn from it now. As well face it boldly from the very beginning, praying always for strength to carry it through to the end.

There was no longer question of *what* she should do with her life, only of *how* she should do it, for the good of her boy, for the honour of the new Aylmers of Aylmer, for the finding again of that which was lost.

And as she lay resting she drew out all her plans, marking distinctly the highways and the by-ways, that there should be no confusion about them, no doubting where the cross-roads lay.

Then she set her foot upon the road and walked, treading fearlessly from the first.

She arose, and taking the child into church,



she christened it Ulric! Ulric! and a few months ago she had refused to let the name soil her lips. Even to-day she hated it beyond all other names under the sun, associating it always with bloodshed and crime. Nevertheless, hers was the task to set it clean before the eyes of all mankind.

The people of Aylmer were a stiff-necked race, that she knew, and slow to be persuaded. But was not she one of them? If she could compel herself, she could compel them also. It were an easy task in comparison with the other.

So, almost before her strength had returned to her, Irion wrote a letter to her husband. She dared not hesitate for a moment or wait, lest she should grow infirm of purpose.

It is so much easier to do when the first impulse is upon us, compelling us to action. Waiting means doubting, and to doubt is to fail. So she wrote to him thus :

‘ MY DEAR ULRIC,

‘ Everything has changed for us, and if I had known then what I am going to tell

you now, things had never been as they are. The error is mine.

‘You are not the last of the Aylmers, Ulric. We have a son! and your duty and mine lies clear before us—to give that son a heritage of honour—not shame; the respect of men—not their contempt. And now I write to ask you to come back to me, Ulric, to help me in this one honest thing of our lives—and so shall the past be forgotten between us. We will be as we were before we knew ourselves, only knowing, there must be no more deceit. Others must be made to know us also.

‘Listen to me, Ulric. I have decided for you; to-day the reins are in my hands, to-morrow you may take them, as is your right.

‘We must go back to Aylmer, and taking the old name, and the place which is ours by right, fight for that right till death stops us! You may doubt of success; I say *it shall be*. Do not fancy I am blind to what lies before me in the place of my birth, in the place of our marriage.

‘I know what it means to undeceive the people of Aylmer, and yet deceive them the more. But it shall be done. They shall deny their own faith, but they shall acknowledge you.

‘Come back to me when you will, now or later, you will find me at Aylmer. I shall have faced the worst of the storm before you join me. I am not afraid ; you must not be either. Together we must shame them into a knowledge of their own injustice, and this for the boy’s sake, and for the old name’s sake. Let me know of your coming, that I may receive you gladly, as becomes the Master of Aylmer.

‘I have called the boy Ulric, after you.

‘Waiting anxiously to see you, I am,

‘Your loving wife,

‘IRION AYLMER.’

It was done. But even this first step had given her infinite pain. To sign the letter, to write his name, linking him with herself now and for ever—him, Ulric Aylmer, the murderer. Her husband ! the father of her

boy! Well, on this ground he might claim everything from her for the future.

So the letter was inclosed and addressed, and sent to Mr. Hawson that he might forward it; for Irion had not even cared to know the place of Ulric Aylmer's pilgrimage, so utterly had she turned from him.

And now to take him back again—to go through the whole farce of wifely love, and wifely obedience, and wifely interest! Not by halves could this thing be done. There must be no falsehood for the boy to discover when he grew older, or for the world to show him. Ulric Aylmer's might be a fool's paradise also, but he at least should never know its foolishness. Irion was certain of her power to act, knowing the cause at stake. By-and-by, too, acting would become second nature, and be no longer difficult. Necessity makes us masters of our art. And Irion's son was a necessity stronger than any other.

After the letter was sent she set about another task more difficult of accomplishment perhaps, but with less, far less, of self-compulsion in it. She must make herself known

to her acquaintance in London. She must bind up all her powers and all her intellect for a confession which must be so made as to leave her their darling still, and innocent of wrong. Friends would be precious now, and if it were possible, she must not lose one of them. Naomi Hurst and Gilbert should learn the truth first. On them she would try the effect of the story as she had it mentally written for public reading. Naomi and Gilbert would help her tell the others, possibly save her the necessity of speaking in her own defence. It is so much easier to prompt than to act.

Only this was not acting. It was stern reality—unmasking deceit. Her part—that deceit should not be found so ugly as stiff-necked virtue, looking on, would have liked to find it.

Eleanor had heard it all before, during the days when Irion lay helpless. She had scarcely been able to believe it at first, it was so far beyond her innocence. But afterwards, finding proof, and finding with it some hardness in her heart towards this husband who had deceived her sister into loving him, she



only said, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged ;'  
'Condemn not, that ye be not condemned.'  
And Eleanor prayed for charity.

Did all of us but echo that simple prayer,  
a few souls the less might be found travelling  
hellward.



## CHAPTER XVII.

So Gilbert Hurst was to dine with Irion once more, as in the days of old. Naomi was in the house still. She had never left it since she came there, defying Agatha Betrix, four months ago. At Irion's request she had stayed on and on, going away with her to the sea, and coming back again; learning the secret, and staying for its realisation; looking upon the child as upon some unknown reptile which it might or might not be dangerous to touch; satirising, sleeping. The season was over, you see; there was nothing else to be done.

But Naomi had not yet heard the story of Ulric Aylmer's identity. If she guessed that things were not quite as they appeared, she showed the most becoming dulness of percep-

tion ; graciously allowing Irion the satisfaction of thinking her one or two senses short of the general allowance. Eleanor was discreet, and had said nothing. Naomi was discreet, and asked nothing. So Irion had the pleasure of making her revelation in her own way.

The time had come for her rehearsal. It seemed only a rehearsal before these two, who were almost as brother and sister to her.

Very beautiful indeed Irion looked that evening as she sat at dinner. She was gay, with her old girlish gaiety, yet with something less of her old strength and colour. A softness lay about her, and a tenderness of expression, which had come to her with her maternity. Gilbert Hurst was 'struck all of a heap,' as he told her unabashed ; and he made a very idol of her for that evening. Gilbert liked change in his divinities. Tomorrow an actress would reign, the next day a countess. He was not dainty—he only required that his idol should give him back smile for smile, and *pretend* to appreciate him, whether she did or not.

Irion's was not pretence ; she knew all

the good that was in Gilbert Hurst—under the rind.

So they dined; and after dinner they sat round the table talking. Irion had been leading up to her subject. At last she reached it.

'And do you know,' she said, 'the coming of his infantine highness upstairs has changed all our plans—my husband's and mine?'

'Of course,' Gilbert answered, 'a brat is bound to upset everything; it's the nature of the beast; a puppy in a china-shop is a joke to it! Well, let's know the rest.'

'In the words of the poet—(are you prepared for a shock?)'

'Fire away.'

*'I am not, love, what I appear.'*

'Three volumes, eh?' Gilbert asked, in a tone of utter disgust.

'As many as you like.'

'Draw it mild, do. One's enough for any fellow. Hang the publishers!'

'I'm not so sure that it will bear crowding; however, I'll do my best for you.' Then

she added, changing her tone, 'Joking aside—did you ever hear the name of Aylmer?'

'Who's Aylmer, when he's at home?'

'My husband.'

'Lewis?'

'No—Aylmer.'

'Perhaps you don't mind placing that little candle on a candlestick. I object to knowing it under a bushel; it's dangerous, to say the least of it. Who's *what*?'

'There, now! you want three volumes, after all, and I feel more than disposed to give them to you, word for word; only Naomi might be tired,' looking across at her.

She was balancing a knife on a fork, apparently attending to nothing else.

'Can you wake up enough to hear what I am going to say, Naomi?'

'If you like,' talking to the knife.

'Our name is not Lewis at all. It is Aylmer. My husband is Ulric Aylmer of Aylmer, Naomi; but for reasons of——'

'Yes; I always said you'd marry that man,' Naomi remarked, more to herself than Irion,

and without the slightest surprise at the discovery.

‘How *could* you have known any such thing?’ rather angrily.

‘When girls go out of their way to abuse a man, they always end by marrying him.’

Gilbert was staring from one to the other, open-mouthed, with an expression of vacant idiocy.

‘Yes,’ Irion answered, good-temperedly, remembering her part just in time; ‘and how I used to fly at you for the bare suggestion! We change, don’t we?’

‘Hanged if I can make head or tail of all this!’ grumbled Gilbert. ‘You two seem to understand each other uncommonly well, though. Very amusing, no doubt, when one sees it—ha! ha!’

‘Don’t get out of temper, or I shall think it’s you who are somebody else, not I,’ Irion said to Gilbert. ‘You want to hear why we called ourselves Lewis, our name being Aylmer. Briefly then—my husband, Ulric Aylmer, is a public character, as Naomi already knows.



He had the *honour* of being tried for murder at twenty.'

Then, seeing Gilbert's face of astonishment—real enough this time :

'Perhaps,' she added, 'you think he ought to have been hung for it, and so ended the story in your one volume?'

'Perhaps you'll be lucid, presently?'

'Unfortunately,' laughing, 'the law held a different opinion, and sentenced him "not guilty."'

'You might have told a fellow that before!' drawing a long breath; 'I was beginning to regard him as a ticket-of-leave man.'

'No such luck for his friends. It was gallows or nothing. An amiable court of justice chose the least of two evils, or I had not been here to tell the tale. But now we come to the exciting part, which will explain everything. The all-important towns of Rockford and Aylmer—his birthplace and mine (I am sorry to say)—refused to echo the civility of the law. (We were always a distinctive and self-righteous race.) To a man, Rockford said, "We are not going to give up the honour



of having a criminal amongst us. We were clever enough to discover him, to pick him out from our midst, and we refused to see our cleverness ignored. We say he *is* guilty. We say the law is bribed. We say our suspicions are better founded than legal proofs. Make a whited sepulchre of him if you like, but we know of the dead men's bones inside." And so they got up a hue and cry against him, and at last succeeded in driving him from his own. Nice people these to have been brought up amongst, were they not?

'Like your good old country narrow-mindedness!'

'They hissed him down in the very streets; and moreover I, a mere child then, had learnt to echo their cry. I was a worthy pupil of their school, a very fanatic in their faith. Well, they succeeded in making him feel the whip with which they lashed him; they drove him away dishonoured by themselves, branded by themselves, so that he could no longer live amongst them. He went to Australia, dropping the old name, which they had made

so hateful to him. All the rest you know except this—the end and the point of it all. After I loved him, and learned who it was I loved, I became a coward on his account, and on my own because of him. I actually *feared* the taunts and jeers of my friends, and the anger of my relations, if they should learn who it was I had married. So I persuaded him to keep up his incognito for my own peace of mind, and for my own satisfaction ; I having learned to hate the name of Aylmer, besides fearing the people. And to this day I should have kept up the deception, fearing to hear him taunted with the old story. I thought I should be happier as Mrs. Lewis, more able to go amongst my friends and relations ; happier, too, living away from Aylmer. I was foolish ; I know it now. The birth of my boy has taught me wisdom. I know I have no right to set him before the world in a false light for a mere prejudice ; more especially as the people of to-day will have forgotten the story of twenty years ago, or have grown more wise than to credit mere village scandal in the face of the legal acquittal.

And so the end of it all is that—for my boy's sake—I have decided on *going to live at Aylmer*, and bearing—as easily as may be—any vulgar suspicions that vulgar tongues may cast upon my husband's name. There is nothing like staring people in the face to shame them. What think you? addressing Naomi.

‘That you must be on the eve of a severe illness, dear child. Back to Aylmer, after all, you have said! How about the ghosts?’

‘And what did *you* say? That if I met Ulric Aylmer I should probably fall in love with him, and that he would forthwith grow into a very angel, wings and all. See how right you were! Are you not delighted at finding yourself such a prophet?’

Irion laughed; Naomi answered nothing; but Gilbert, bringing his fist down with a thump on the table, said:

‘And if you think I understand a word of all this, you're miserably deluded. I'm not a woman, remember.’

‘We can enter into details later, and Naomi can help you with the puzzle; she

knows where most of the pieces fit, having heard all about it long ago. I'm sure I've talked enough now. Your three-volume novel would be a fool to me. Let us come up to the drawing-room.'

'Hang it all! but I want to hear what all the murder story was about. My memory isn't good for twenty years.'

'Get an old copy of the *Times*, and read for yourself. There was no secret.'

'Don't like the smell of old paper—prefer the human voice divine.'

'Perhaps Eleanor will tell you about it, if you make yourself very agreeable. Will you, Nell?'

'Certainly not,' Eleanor answered demurely, thinking the subject at least serious. 'I object to mixing myself up in other people's affairs, unless I can do them any good.'

'There!' said Irion, gaily. 'There's a true-born Rockfordite for you! She's half disposed to call up the ghost of her country's dead hiss. I believe she would do it, if she could muster courage. Come now, Nell, confess that you would like to prove my husband a

Corsair in Poole's clothing, for your old faith's sake.'

'Not at all, Irion. I don't know anything about him, so how can I discuss him?'

'Well, Gilbert, if Eleanor won't satisfy you on principle, and if Naomi won't satisfy you through laziness, *I will*—but not this evening. I've had quite enough of myself for dessert, and should like something else for a change just now.'

'Your humble servant, Mrs.—— What is it?'

'Aylmer, for the future.'

'That's as may be. Ten to one Lewis is Lewis to the end with me.'

And talking thus, Irion led them all upstairs into the drawing-room. She had *brought out* her story at last; but it did not seem quite perfect yet. There were details, of which strangers might question.

'And I will answer them, every one,' she said. 'There shall be nothing left to their invention.'

So she sent her story forth to the world. Some would read it in one light, she knew;



some in another. If blame they must, they must blame her now. She had taken upon herself the deed of the deception. Hers was the fault that the world had not known them as they were.

‘It will not injure me,’ she said. ‘I am a woman; women are supposed to have their weaknesses, and men are supposed to indulge them—by choice or necessity. Our bad name does not hang us. Men are different.’



## CHAPTER XVIII.

So Naomi, going home atlast, told all of them in Park Place the story, word for word, as Irion had told it to her. What matter that for herself she read its meaning so differently? Had she not known Irion and her girlish prejudice, how strong it was, and all prevailing? and Irion's nature, so little given to change? No; Naomi chose rather to be her own interpreter of signs, past and present; and her interpretation fell but little short of the truth. Naomi Hurst, whatever she seemed, was neither a fool, nor blind.

'The story does Irion infinite credit,' she said; 'it deserves backing up. How cleverly she has drilled herself to laugh over that murder story! and what faith she has in the righteousness of the law! How convenient

it is to change one's religion yearly! Well, I shall not trouble myself about it; we need never do more than take for gospel all our friends tell us. The more one sees of life, the more certain one is of the desirability of setting reason on a shelf, lest out of its obtrusiveness it should prove us fools in our own sight. We, who are so wise!

Mrs. Betrix, too, accepted the situation as it was shown her. It fitted in with her own ideas—and we always accept what pleases us. Of course, the master of Aylmer would come home, now that his son was a fact; and coming home, would he not soon find out that his wife was even cleverer at deception than he had imagined her? He knew already that she could stoop to occupy a false place in the world out of sheer moral cowardice; he would soon learn that she could as easily give her husband a false character out of sheer lack of morality.

He must know how weak she was. But to be weak on his account was a thing apart. He was not a man to admire weakness where another man was the question.

Yes—it suited Mrs. Betrix well enough that Irion's husband should return to his own just now.

Agatha Betrix could just remember the case of the Aylmer murder and the acquittal. In London the verdict of the law had been final and satisfying. Nobody had questioned of Ulric Aylmer's innocence, and certainly no one would question of it now, twenty years afterwards. In London, at any rate, everyone had forgotten; forgotten as if the Aylmers of Aylmer had never been 'a family.' We have too much to do in London to remember the offences of our neighbours—when they are not against ourselves.

But Irion's offence *was* against Mrs. Betrix, against her dress, against her age, against her popularity in the same 'set.' Such offences are beyond pardon, and must be punished. Mrs. Betrix had taken the law into her own hands now—only the day of the trial was not yet.

Gilbert Hurst, too, had at last understood the story of Ulric Aylmer's past, and that he had deceived him with the rest. His friend of

their old Australian wanderings was not what he had shown himself. Irion was not what he had believed her. He had not fancied her the sort of woman to lead a man on to further deception from craven fear of lying tongues. He had not believed her one to be swayed by a vulgar prejudice, and turned away from the right. Far rather could he have imagined her doing from the first what she was about to do now, when it would be so much more difficult. Going to Aylmer and braving their scorn, and defying them to keep Ulric Aylmer out of his own.

‘But one never does know a woman,’ he said ; ‘and for the best of all reasons, no one thing ever remains in her long enough to be known.’

Thus he philosophized—but he was disappointed in Irion, nevertheless. And he was disappointed in his old friend also. Why had Lewis been so weak as to allow a wife to carry on a deceit which was harmless to him as a bachelor and a wanderer ; nay, justifiable, even, seeing the handling which the name of Aylmer had received from the people, and the

dirt which they had cast upon it. But for her, a woman, the alias was a great social wrong, which would surely be visited upon her later.

A man must be a very coward, Gilbert argued, who will allow a wife to frighten him into giving up, not his own honour alone, but his children's—the honour of their name and their birth. His excuse and hers—that she, poor fool, was too weak a creature to bear the pain of a few stones, which a new generation of townsfolk might cast at him and her for old remembrance' sake. Gilbert had not thought Claud Lewis a man to be ruled by a wife, or one to feel any mercy for woman's weakness—and behold him, after all, a very slave to a wife's prejudice!

'The superiority of man!' he said, 'a delusion; animals are higher, they don't look one thing and be another. I'm justified in editing *Satire* — hanged if I'm not. Wouldn't have asserted as much a week ago.'

But Irion was good company, and Gilbert Hurst was no stickler for high-flown infal-



libility, especially in women; so that after the first day, it was the same to him whether she were Mrs. Lewis or one of the Aylmers of Aylmer. Her house in London had always been a 'jolly' place to visit; doubtless, her 'ancestral hall' would be 'jollier still, and—out of the reach of Agatha's tongue,' he told himself, rejoicing for Irion's sake.

But he did not know the strength of a woman's weapons.

Already Irion had invited him to visit her in her new home. He and Naomi were to be among the first received at Aylmer. Naomi would give Irion countenance, and Gilbert would stand surety for Ulric Aylmer's respectability during the years of his exile. It was well to be seen possessing friends from the beginning. Moreover, did not Naomi stand high in the goodwill of Colonel and Mrs. Floyd, and higher still in John's estimation? John was vicar now—Vicar of Aylmer—and his voice would find many an echo in the parish. As for John himself, what Naomi bade him say he would be quite sure to say—persuading himself the while that there was untold wisdom in her counsel.



But to herself Irion looked chiefly as the means of bending stiff necks, and leading unwilling feet. To herself as a Floyd, to herself as a native of Rockford, and a part of themselves. They knew, one and all of them, how strongly she had felt on their side of the Aylmer murder question, 'therefore they will argue,' she said, counting her chances, 'that if I have brought myself to marry the reprobate, I must first have brought myself to a knowledge that he was no reprobate after all, finding—as we often find on searching—the Devil less black than he is painted. Less black,' she repeated, '*less*.' and the very word savoured of the father of all lies to her, who knew its hollowness. 'But our people have great faith in their own,' she answered, confident of success.

And she sent out workmen to Aylmer, builders and painters and decorators, out-of-door servants and in-door servants, men and maids. And the doors and the windows were thrown open, and the sunshine fell once more over the tapestries and the old carvings. And the family-portraits smiled with a new life after the long sleep which had fallen upon

them. It was as the waking of the castle of the Sleeping Beauty. And the cry rang through all the county that the last of the Aylmers was coming back to his own.

Already they knew, for it had been blazoned forth by the men and maids, that he was the man who had married Irion Floyd, coming amongst them like a wolf into the fold in sheep's clothing, with whitened paws and a lying tongue, deceiving them to the last with a false name and a false character. Already there was indignation and anger against him, even in the hearts which had not known him. For to the men and women of to-day Ulric Aylmer was as much a stranger as if he had not been born amongst them. Scarcely one in all the county had known him. Did he suppose they would welcome him now because of this ignorance? they asked. Did he count on being received in these later days of advanced opinions and lenient judgments? Did he flatter himself that the people of Rockford and Aylmer, marching with the times, would hold every man honest till the law convicted him of felony?

He would find himself wrong.

Your county families do not submit to have a thread passed through their noses with a golden needle, and a court fool in cap and bells to lead them.

But it was exciting, and sleepy Rockford had not been excited for twenty years. It gave a new flavour to its tea and toast, and a new life to its croquet parties. (They played croquet still at Rockford!) And the noses of the maiden aunts grew longer and straighter, as point to point, in the nearness of sisterly love, they gloated, crow-like, over the smell of a twenty years' old corpse, dug out of its grave and exposed to see what effect a breath of fresh air would have towards bringing it to life again.

A favourite trade among us, this body-snatching—but it leaves a taint sometimes.

Irion, even before she set foot in Aylmer, learnt that the proverbial bed of roses was not for her; but rather they were already pulling up stinging-nettles with which to cover her.

A letter from her brother John was the

Inchcape Bell, warning her of the rocks which lay beneath.

‘DEAR IRION,

‘By the desire of our parents, I write to you in all brotherly kindness and charity, judging of nothing before I shall have received your defence out of your own lips.

‘Have you deceived us, or have you been yourself deceived? We would fain know the latter of you, that knowing, we may stand around you, and give you the protection of our strong right hand against Satan and the works of Satan. Has this Ulric Aylmer, using the wiles which are his, blinded your eyes, and hardened your heart, and persuaded you that your people are liars, and your God a delusion? or what force did he use to make you marry him, and deceive us, and cast your own soul into hell? For are not the abettors of crime one with the doers thereof, and is not the wife one flesh with the husband? Can the spirit be apart? But I would warn you, Irion, or counsel you, to deal

with us honestly from the first ; to tell us the truth, and to commit yourself to our mercy. Are we not Christians and brothers, and shall we not fight for our own ?

‘Doubtless, for your boy’s sake, you are right to come back to Aylmer. It is his own, a gift from God, whereof he shall hereafter give an account of his stewardship ! And I would not that you, my sister, should rob him of his name and place. If he comes amongst us *without his father* we will take him to us, nor visit the sins of that father upon the child ; rather leaving God to be his judge. But for the other, the father, I tell you, Irion, in the name of Rockford, in the name of Aylmer, in the name of the very parents who gave you birth, *we will not know him* ; he who, by the blackness of his own crime, has forfeited his place in God’s fold.

‘Nevertheless, do not mistake me. There is joy over one sinner that repenteth. And if Ulric Aylmer would that I should come unto him to heal him, I will go with joy and thanksgiving, even as the apostles of old went both to the Jews and to the Gentiles ;



to the believing and to the unbelieving. Ulric Aylmer is a sheep of my fold (if gone astray), and if he call upon me to bring him back again in Christ's name, I shall not be found wanting. Only we must be sure of his cleanness before we sit him down to meat with us.

'You understand me? If Ulric Aylmer comes to Aylmer, he comes as a stranger, and remains as a stranger; lest, having polluted you, he should pollute the others of our flock—he being not alone a son of Cain, but a deceiver, and *an infidel*. He will do well to keep out of our sight, that we in Christian charity may save the soul of his child, and bring it back to righteousness.

'I commend Eleanor for electing to remain in London till the works which she has begun shall be completed; and I thank you for the help you have lent her. I will pray without ceasing that you may be brought back to us.

'Your loving brother,

'JOHN FLOYD.'



'Rockford! Aylmer! I wish I could understand them,' Irion said to herself, not angry, but puzzled. 'These people, so strong in their faith, so inconsequent! "There is joy over one sinner that repenteth," they say. And in the same moment they bar the gates and block the doors, and make repentance impossible. "Wash and be clean," they say. Yet behold them standing round the pool, and guarding it with drawn swords, lest any unclean thing should touch the sacred waters.'

END OF VOL. II.